

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

January / February 2008 • cjr.org

## Secrets of the City

What *The Wire* reveals about urban journalism

LAWRENCE LANAHAN

### BIG FISH AND SMALL FRY

Just how dangerous is corporate ownership?

CARLIN ROMANO

### THE REDEMPTION OF CHRIS ROSE

After the flood, a New Orleans columnist hits bottom and climbs back

BARRY YEOMAN

### THE OUTSIDER

A hotshot editor fails to comprehend the soul of community journalism

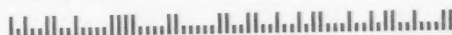
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**Sun people know.**

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

January/February 2008

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961



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# Opening Shot



**L**ook at a city and what do you see? A kind of miracle, first of all, that the complicated beast even works. Look deeper and you see a tragedy, in that vast swaths of the place work so well for some people and so poorly for others. David Simon, the creator of HBO's *The Wire*, is crafting a sort of televised novel of the American metropolis, institution by institution, and in its fifth season, *The Wire* is turning its attention to the urban daily, via a fictional *Baltimore Sun*, something like the real *Sun* where Simon worked as a metro reporter for twelve years. In our cover story, Lawrence Lanahan describes a bitter feud between Simon and his former editors, and, more interestingly, explores the deep philosophical debate between them about how best to cover a city. On page 32 we move south to another city, New Orleans, where Barry Yeoman introduces us to Chris Rose, a columnist who fell apart quite publicly after Katrina, and then found a redeeming mission as a fierce champion of his drowned hometown, as did his newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*. All that and bloggers with labor issues, global embedding, a debate on corporate ownership, a First Amendment victory march, the quirky genre of journalistic experiments, and more. We hope you enjoy it. **CJR**

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**Urban perspective** East 100th Street, New York, 1966



## Supply and Demand

*Journalism must invest in educated consumers*

The news in recent years about civic education and engagement in American society has been dismal, and particularly so when it comes to young people's attention to serious news. All but the most cynical critics would agree that a ready supply of high-quality news and information is essential for our democracy to work, and that, for the moment, we have devised no better way to produce this than our traditional news outlets.

Yet today's teens and young adults are growing up in a society in which the concept of "journalism" has been distorted by decades of anti-press propaganda that reduces all of journalism to an elitist cabal that pushes a left-wing agenda, consciously or not. (More recently, the left's critique of the press as a cowardly corporate stooge has been no less simplistic.) They are growing up, too, in the bosom of "the media," an indiscriminating conception of our communication environment that facilitates a blurring of the line between entertainment and journalism.

In his recent book, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*, Peter Levine, the director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, focuses on reforming the press as an institution, rather than trying to convince young people to value journalism, as a strategy for reversing their disengagement from serious news.

But it seems to us that both strategies are necessary, and while the former is very much the subject of discussion and experimentation, the latter is not.

Not long ago, the Project for Excellence in Journalism explored the idea of a public-education campaign to teach people about the role of journalism in developing an informed citizenry. PEJ ultimately didn't pursue the project, but Tom Rosenstiel, PEJ's director, says if the major media companies got behind the idea, it might make sense. "We learned that convincing someone to use a car seat is one thing, very concrete," he says, "while the whole news/citizenship issue is much more abstract. It really is more of a curriculum than a single message."

At Stony Brook University on Long Island, Howard Schneider is building that curriculum. Schneider, the former editor of *Newsday*, was hired in 2005 to develop a journalism program at the school, and soon became convinced that, as he says, "it was not sufficient for us to simply train the next generation of journalists. We had to train the next generation of news consumers, too."

Thus was born "News Literacy," a course that is now mandatory for Stony Brook journalism majors; a grant from the Knight Foundation is designed to expand the program beyond that, to 10,000 of the university's 15,000 undergraduates. Last fall it was taught to more than six hundred students outside the journalism program.

The goal is to give students the skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news, in all its forms. "We will never sustain a robust press," Schneider says,

"unless we have consumers who appreciate it and can distinguish between quality journalism and chuck."

Journalism doesn't help its cause when it fails to do all it can to scrutinize the president's case for war, for instance, or allows fabulists to defraud readers. But among the realities Schneider says his students come to understand are how difficult a job journalism is, that most mistakes are not malicious—and that most "bias" isn't.

These are important things for news consumers to know, and every serious news outlet has a vested interest in the kinds of work that Schneider is doing, and that PEJ wanted to do. The relentless effort to divine what readers want misses a major point: effective citizenship in a democracy requires some effort, and journalism is an integral tool for that job. It's time for everyone who cares about sustaining good journalism, and a healthy democracy, to put their money, and their mouths, behind this message. **CJR**



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**The Believers**

Michael Massing's excellent critique of "war experts" Michael O'Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack weighed heavily on me (CJR, November/December). I, too, pored over Pollack's *The Threatening Storm* in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq and found myself swayed by Pollack's liberal creds and seemingly astute analysis of Middle East policy. He made a clear and convincing case for an American-led invasion, for the imminent threat of Saddam's WMD program, and for preemption as the new containment.

Many of us liberals who subscribed to the I-can't-believe-I'm-a-hawk club, based on the persuasive think-tank analysis in which Pollack and O'Hanlon tender, must now come to terms with the moral failings of such membership. But has Pollack? Has the press?

The question recalls Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which the author posits that criminal Communist regimes in Central Europe were not solely the design of criminals, but also of enthusiasts convinced they had found the only road to paradise. Later, when the atrocities were all too apparent, when freedom and independence were lost, the true believers proclaimed, "We didn't know!" The issue, Kundera writes, is not whether a man didn't know, but whether he is innocent *because* he didn't know. In other words, is a fool on the throne relieved of all responsibility merely because he is a fool?

Here we are—3,600 U.S. soldiers dead, 30,000 injured, \$330 billion later—and it seems Pollack and O'Hanlon are still true believers.

Lisa Sweetingham  
Los Angeles, CA

**As You Like It**

In "Tailor-made" (CJR, September/October), Megan Garber addressed the versioning of a television documentary, *Six Days in June* (about the Six Day War), for which I was executive producer for WGBH. The article began the important



**I was absolutely floored by Frady's rich, vivid prose (and delighted by his made-up words and locutions).**

work of familiarizing the public with the common but largely overlooked process by which different versions of a documentary are prepared and broadcast for different national audiences. That said, Garber did her readers a disservice by accepting the argument of director Ilan Ziv that the versioning process in the case of *Six Days in June* was driven by the pursuit of a political agenda, and a pro-Israel, anti-Arab one at that.

Producing documentaries, especially international documentaries, is expensive, often necessitating co-production agreements among international producers to share costs. Every co-production agreement I know includes provisions giving all co-producers the right to create a version that is appropriate to their needs, including length, language, journalistic and craft standards, and the demands of their particular audience.

*Six Days in June* followed this model to the letter. The project was co-

produced by broadcasters from Israel, France, Canada, and the United States, who aggregated more than a million dollars. Each of the co-producers produced a version appropriate to their needs. Not surprisingly—indeed, as expected—those versions are quite different from one another.

The Israeli version, for example, is longer than the others, and exhibits a characteristically rough-and-tumble journalistic and documentary style. The French version exhibits a signature Gallic form of committed journalism, what I think most American journalists would consider fast and loose.

For the American version, we added and subtracted as Garber correctly points out. But contrary to the assertions and inferences in the article, those decisions were driven by a journalistic commitment to fairness and accuracy.

To cite two specific examples, Garber and director Ziv seem to find political bias in the decisions not to include the "hard figure" of 100,000 Palestinians displaced by the fighting, and not to mention Israel's attack on Jordan at the war's beginning. In fact, that "hard" (and suspiciously round) figure seems to have been plucked from the air, and the assertion of an initial Israeli attack on Jordan is simply wrong.

Finally, I find the article's portrayal of the program's director as a proud auteur whose unique vision of the *Six Day War* was subverted by a ham-fisted political commissar (me) to be wrong-headed and personally offensive. During the production, Ilan relied heavily—and at the time, gratefully—on the help of many people, including those he now criticizes. He knew the rules of the versioning game by which he now claims to have been ill-treated.

Zvi Dor-Ner  
Boston, MA

*Megan Garber responds:* I'm surprised Dor-Ner saw himself in "Tailor-made" as



a “ham-fisted political commissar.” Such a portrayal was certainly not my intent. Rather, I questioned—and still do—Dor-Ner’s premise that the “needs” of international audiences vary so greatly as to demand different versions of the same documentary, and believe that, at the very least, Americans deserve to know that they got a different version of *Six Days* from the rest of the world. “Tailor-made” never treated the details Dor-Ner cites as overall historical fact (indeed, it made clear that Ziv’s film was revisionist), but rather as evidence of the versions’ variations. And it never questioned whether Dor-Ner and other producers followed reversioning provisions “to the letter”; it questioned the provisions themselves. How, after all, can we navigate the future together when we’re guided by separate versions of the past?

#### Found Treasure

I was deeply touched by Scott Sherman’s appreciation of Marshall Frady (“The Unvanquished,” *CJR*, November/December). I still don’t understand why Frady wasn’t celebrated more—David Halberstam, in the introduction to Frady’s *Billy Graham*, referred to him as, I recall, the most talented writer of the generation that came of age in the 1960s. I discovered Frady in the autumn of 1975 when I read his piece on Wallace in *The New York Review of Books*—I was absolutely floored by his rich, vivid prose (and delighted by his made-up words and locutions: “a bobbly glitter-haired sprite”). And the poignancy: I can still recall his description of Wallace in a wheelchair on the porch of the Alabama governor’s mansion, a disconsolate, lonely figure, dozing in the sun. And to think that I was living in New York in 2002 when Frady made an appearance and I missed him!

Paul Sweeney  
Austin, TX

#### Credit Due

In our “Orwell in ‘08” cover package in the November/December issue, we failed to credit the artist who so strikingly illustrated the pieces with four drawings, including the stunning opener of George Orwell himself. We apologize. The artist is Andrew Zbihlyj. **CJR**

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## EDITOR’S NOTE

WE ARE DELIGHTED to announce our new back-of-the-book editor. James Marcus will have the title of editor at large, and his primary responsibility will be the Ideas & Reviews section of the magazine, though we expect he will help us lift the rest of the magazine and our Web site, as well. James has been a regular book reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsday* and also writes about music (pop, jazz, and classical). He has contributed to *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Washington Post Book World*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, among other publications. He is the senior editor at Propeller.com, a user-driven news portal (formerly Netscape.com), where he writes, edits, and moderates discussions (he will work at *CJR* on a half-time basis). He just finished a novel—*The Only News I Know*—and has translated a half dozen books from Italian to English.

We’re also happy to tell you that our daily coverage of the 2008 presidential race is at full steam on the Campaign Desk section of *cjr.org*. Our staff writers are focused on the coverage of the race, particularly on issues such as immigration, gender, and Iraq, and some of them will be traveling to early voting states. Our science writer, Curtis Brainard, is zeroing in on climate and energy, and Trudy Lieberman, a veteran health-care journalist, is parsing the insurance-debate coverage. In addition, we have been joined by a group of experienced journalists who will contribute as guest columnists. These include Lou Cannon, Todd Gitlin, Myra MacPherson, Peter Osnos (*CJR*’s vice chairman), Steven Roberts, Lynn Sherr, and Jules Witcover. That group will grow, and will be supplemented by regional guest columnists. History is on the move, and so is Campaign Desk. —Mike Hoyt

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## EVAN JENKINS

EVERY TWO MONTHS here, as *CJR* went to press, we got a welcome visit from Evan Jenkins, our consulting editor. He would find an empty desk, consider aloud the status of the New York Mets and a world issue or two, and then, over two or three days, read the entire issue on large sheets of paper that he’d festoon with yellow Post-it notes. One Post-it was a simple query; two meant the equivalent of an arched eyebrow; three or more and an editor knew he would soon hear from Evan in person. He guarded the reader like a bulldog. He wrote our Language Corner column, too, and the last one he put together appears on page 10. It’s about attribution, though if you read it, you will see it is also a strike against pretension in the world of rules about language.

Evan died of cancer on November 30 in his home, at age seventy-two. At a party in his honor a few days later, his son John spoke of that event and first used the words “passed away” instead of “died,” then corrected himself, having heard his father’s gentle voice in his head. The party was a nice affair at a bar in Long Island, populated by friends and former colleagues, many from *Newsday* and *The New York Times*, the two places where he spent most of his career.

Somebody from the *Times* told a story about Evan standing up to a bigwig foreign editor over attribution standards. Somebody else told one about how Evan had a drink or two one night in Manhattan and then sang show tunes all the way home—on the Long Island Rail Road. The twist is that he had such a lovely singing voice that nobody in the rail car seemed to mind. He loved music and words. Evan also served as writing coach to many a struggling student here at Columbia, and one of them cried at the party as she described how he had tossed her a life raft a few years ago. A professor had told her that she should consider getting out of journalism. She relayed this to Evan, whose response was, “Who the hell is *he*? Let’s get to work.” She went on to a career in print and public radio.

We intend to keep Evan’s collected Language Corner columns on the Resources page of our Web site, because they are so clear and useful to anyone who writes or edits. Also they remind us of him. —The Editors



# Currents



## Military Embeds: the World Tour

In February 2006, I was detained by the U.S. Army and ejected from Iraq. My crime? Reporting on the weapons and tactics used to counter Improvised Explosive Devices, in apparent violation of the ground rules for embedded media. Unbeknownst to me—and to my on-the-record source, apparently—the military considers details about radio jammers (designed to block the signals that detonate IEDs) secret. They

could have saved us all a lot of grief by telling me that in advance, but that kind of thoroughness, I soon learned, is too much to expect. I figured my two-year-old military-reporting career was over.

As it turned out, the arrest didn't end my war correspondence—just the U.S. part of it. Before and after the arrest, I've ridden to war or to peacekeeping with all kinds of armies—a sort of world military tour. One thing I've learned is that the way in which an army handles media says a lot about its values, its confidence in its mission, and—dare I say it?—its effectiveness in modern warfare, in which perceptions are critical. Here's a sampling of what I learned:

### U.S. Army

*North-central Iraq:  
January and March 2005;  
February 2006*

As the lead military service in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army handles a lot of press and that volume may help explain the service's lapses. Since 2003, the Army has been playing catch-up to rapidly evolving media, alternately embracing and clamping down on bloggers, for instance, and constantly changing or reinterpreting the ground rules for embeds. One day, a certain tactic or technology is off-limits to reporters; the next, the Army is trumpeting the same weapons and practices as part of some PR strategy. (Shortly before my eviction, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

and other media conducted an on-the-record interview with a Marine general concerning the same technologies that I got into so much trouble for reporting on.) What's more, the service's media-relations effort has always appeared under-resourced compared with other nations' militaries. I was neither the first nor last reporter to run afoul of the Army's struggling public-affairs apparatus. Michael Yon, an independent blogger and former Special Forces soldier, famously stared down Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, a senior flack in Iraq, after Brooks tried to "dis-embed" him from a base in central Iraq in March because, as Yon recalls, he was "taking up too much space." That space amounted to a single trailer. Reporters who lose their arguments with Army media handlers can wind up blacklisted, as I did. On the plus side, as long as you keep a low profile, you can have pretty much free reign while embedded with the U.S. Army. I've tagged along on ambushes and night raids.

### U.S. Marine Corps

*Western Iraq: January 2006*

"We don't lose reporters." That's what a Marine officer told me one night when he found me wandering around a U.S. base near Tikrit, lost yet again after another missed connection courtesy of the U.S. Army. A year later, I was embedded with a Marine fighter squadron in west-

**'The biggest newspaper battle of the early part of the 21st century is about to begin.'**

—Andrew Neil, former *Sunday Times* of London editor, predicting increased competition between *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*

ern Iraq, observing combat operations and hanging out with the pilots and ground crew between missions. It was easily one of the best experiences of my career. The Marines were flying round-the-clock missions at low altitude, in poor weather, snooping for insurgents, and coming to the rescue of pinned-down ground troops. It was heroic, and my stories reflected that. But despite repeated attempts, I've never been allowed back. The Army carries a lot of weight in Iraq, and the Marines told me that they had little choice but to deny my embed requests. (A Marine press officer told CJR their decision was independent.) The Marines have a reputation for excellent media relations; in my case, I got the feeling that they weren't happy being pressured by the Army.

#### **British Army**

*Southern Iraq: June 2005, September 2005, October 2006, December 2007*

The British Army assigns escorts—usually captains with at least five years' experience—to all its embedded journalists. This made me suspicious at first. But in my four embeds with British forces in southern Iraq, I've found my escorts to be invariably helpful in coordinating travel and security and navigating the bewildering labyrinth of military bureaucracy. And in October 2006, Captain Eugenijus Lastauskas, a media handler on loan from the Lithuanian army, literally

dragged me to cover while mortar rounds exploded around us. By far, the British have the best embed program of all the armies I've known. They grant excellent access and devote significant resources to ensuring that the press is safe, comfortable, and equipped to do its job.

#### **Australian Army**

*Southern Iraq: June 2005; East Timor: April 2007; Afghanistan: June 2007*

The tiny, scrappy Aussie army is one of the busiest in the world. Everywhere I go I seem to find Australian soldiers with their characteristic cheerfulness. In southern Iraq in 2005, an Australian cavalry unit took me dune-hopping in its eight-wheeled armored vehicles. In East Timor in April, some Australian officers invited me to their camp for a demonstration of native spears, crossbows, and slingshots. But in Afghanistan in June, I was with an Australian platoon that narrowly escaped a suicide bombing that killed a Dutch soldier and ten Afghans. In the aftermath of the bombing, the platoon leader ordered me to stay put while he raced to investigate. The Aussies are great at handling the press—until the shooting starts. Such risk-aversion reflects a military suspicious of the press and inexperienced in media relations.

#### **Dutch Army**

*Afghanistan: June 2007*

Armored, air-conditioned

sleeping trailers, dedicated workspaces with Internet access, and a relatively large staff of press officers make the Dutch one of the most comfortable militaries for embedded reporters. But political sensitivities among the decidedly antiwar Dutch public translate into a long list of restrictions for embeds. When fighting broke out in the Dutch- and Australian-occupied Afghan province of Uruzgan last summer, the Ministry of Defense tried to suppress reports from the three embedded reporters, me included. Army press officers fought the restrictions, ultimately forcing the ministry to relent. Still, the same press officers flatly refused to allow embeds anywhere near the fighting.

#### **Italian Army**

*Lebanon: January 2007*

Covering UN peacekeeping operations is like arguing with a superintelligent, cranky five-year-old. In Lebanon, I had to navigate bewildering layers of red tape just to accompany the Italian Army on a brief patrol near the Israeli border. Such bureaucracy is perhaps inevitable when you kludge together a dozen different armies, all with their own rules and political sensitivities, and deposit them in contested territory. The Italians were perfectly polite, but obviously uncomfortable with me and especially with my interpreter, whom they seemed to suspect of

## **HARD NUMBERS**

**104** mentions of General David Petraeus in forty-eight major news outlets, between July 1 and September 30, 2007

**293** mentions, among the same outlets and during the same period, of Senator Larry Craig

**64** percent of Americans who say they don't trust presidential campaign coverage

**40** percent who believe that coverage is too liberal

**21** percent who believe that it's too conservative

**30** percent who believe it's politically neutral

**74** stories fact-checking various claims made by candidates, published in thirty-four of the largest U.S. newspapers during the 2000 presidential election

**154** fact-checking stories published in those newspapers during the 2004 election

**258** fact-checking stories published in those newspapers during the 2006 midterm election

**34.4** percent of respondents, in a 2007 survey of National Book Critics Circle members, who said it's unethical for reviewers to decline reviewing books they don't like to avoid saying "negative things in print"

**34.4** percent of respondents who said that practice is ethical

**54.6** percent of respondents who said literary blogs should adhere to the same rules of ethics as newspapers' book-review sections

Sources: Harvard Kennedy School Center for Public Leadership, Project for Excellence in Journalism, University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center, National Book Critics Circle

being an Islamic terrorist just because he was Lebanese.

### **Iraqi Army**

*Northern Iraq: April 2005*

I was shocked when the U.S. Army captain commanding the unit I was embedded with agreed to let me hang for a couple of days with a nearby Iraqi battalion. Sure, the battalion was comprised mostly of pro-American Kurds, who have a reputation for honesty and loyalty. Still, the Iraqi military as a whole has zero experience handling the press, and the experience had a decidedly tribal flavor. I never left the battalion commander's side, and the commander's two bodyguards never left his side. At a memorial for 5,000 Kurds killed in Saddam Hussein's brutal chemical attack on Halabja in 1988, the commander's family joined us. Together

our motley gang of soldiers, officers, one reporter, and a half dozen civilians rambled around northern Iraq in souped-up Toyota trucks.

—David Axe

## **Games in Palestine**

I HAD JUST ARRIVED in the Middle East, and my editor was describing my first assignment for the wire service: I was to accompany the Israel Defense Forces on a raid of a suspected terrorist's house. The piece would be published in a European paper that wanted a story about what happens on such missions, and how prisoners are treated. Equipped only with a map, a notebook, and advice, I set out to meet my contact, a commanding officer in the IDF.

Then I leaned back in my chair at my San Francisco apartment and got perspective. I wasn't *actually* about to witness a raid, I was playing *Global Conflicts: Palestine*, a video game designed to convey the intricacies of being a journalist in the volatile Middle East. *Global Conflicts: Palestine* is made by Serious Games Interactive, a Danish company that is at the forefront of a new wave of games that explore management and leadership challenges. Other examples in the genre include *Peacemaker*, in which players are either the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian president, and *Food Force*, a game about the difficulties of dispensing food aid inside impoverished countries. *Global Conflicts: Palestine* is the first "serious game" in which you play as a journalist, and it's been sold in

some fifty countries since its July 2007 release, winning multiple industry awards for creativity. Can a game really capture the perils and responsibilities of being a journalist in a war-torn country?

Here's how it goes: after getting an assignment, you are left to your own devices. You can wander the streets of Jerusalem, take a cab to the Palestinian town of Abu Dis, or visit the Jewish settlements and the neighboring Palestinian villages. Every move and decision, every word you utter, affects relationships with sources. Those relationships evolve throughout the game, so you don't want to burn anyone. For example, Israeli soldiers have negative reactions if you don't don an IDF bulletproof vest while following them on the raid, but Palestinian citizens are much harder to approach while wearing such a vest. There is no "winning" in this game; the best you can do is write an "article"—actually a selection of quotes—that has an impact on the situation through the breadth of information reported, has the right angle for the paper that's publishing it, and keeps a critical distance. Sound familiar?

*Global Conflicts: Palestine* won't teach anybody how to write. After moving around Jerusalem, the resulting story consists only of a headline, a photo, and three quotes of the player's choosing. Still, through the eyes of the main character, you get some sense of the daily hardships of the Palestinians, the daily fears of the Israelis, and the difficulty of having to work between the two as a journalist.

—David Cohn

## **LANGUAGE CORNER SAYS WHO?**

More [cjr.org/resources/lc](http://cjr.org/resources/lc)

IMMEDIATELY TO THE IMMEDIATE POINT: "According to" is a basic, uncomplicated phrase of attribution. As the revered Professor John B. Bremner of the University of Kansas put it in his dazzling *Words of Words* (1980), "The city is going broke, according to the mayor," has the same meaning as "The city is going broke, the mayor said." Period.

But mischievous spirits hover.

Kirk Arnott, an assistant managing editor of *The Columbus Dispatch*, e-mailed to say he'd been taught somewhere that "according to" applied to documents, not speech.

And that jogged a memory, shared with peers (but explicitly dismissed by Bremner), that "according to" cast doubt on the information involved.

No. In both cases, any such idiosyncratic meaning the writer/editor intended would be opaque. The reader would need—a *footnote*! Consider:

- For centuries, "farther" and "further" meant *either* literal distance or figurative. Then an arbitrary pronouncement in 1906 quite unhelpfully gave "farther" to the literal, "further" to figurative. Suddenly, puzzled readers needed—a *footnote*!
- The British authority H. W. Fowler wrote in his 1926 classic *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* that "lucidity and ease" might be enhanced if "which" were banished in favor of "that" in restrictive clauses (the cars that were green failed to run). Purely arbitrary, and the British have ignored him to this day. But some influential American editors thought it sounded nice. Thus, a big chunk of American journalism adopted an unhelpful complication requiring—a *footnote*!

Morals of the tale:

Resist unhelpful rules, old or new, requiring footnotes.

As all of us editors would urge, don't overdo "according to."

—Evan Jenkins



**LAUREL** to the editorial staff of *Stars and Stripes* for uncovering a murky financial relationship between its paper and the Pentagon's public-relations machine, and a Dart to

the publishing staff for signing off on the arrangement.

First, some background. *Stars and Stripes* is an odd animal. Despite serving a military audience and receiving about half of its budget from the Pentagon, the paper's civilian editorial staff bristles at suggestions that it's anything less than editorially independent. They take pains to distinguish between "command information"—say, content on the Department of Defense Web site or the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service—and the journalism in *Stripes*.

So when reporter Jeff Schogol discovered a contract showing a \$499,000 deal between the paper and an outside PR firm, it raised newsroom eyebrows—especially since the contract was for a controversial Pentagon program known as "America Supports You" that has been criticized as propaganda.

The digging started after David Cloud of *The New York Times* reported in May 2007 that the Defense Department's inspector general had begun an inquiry into whether funds for "America Supports You" were shifted from other Pentagon programs improperly, in a way that could have avoided budget scrutiny. *Stars & Stripes* first reported the paper's own involvement last October.

"My biggest concern was not, 'Will we run this or not,'" says Executive Editor Robb Grindstaff. "It was, 'We've got to get this story, get it first, and break it.'"

"America Supports You" has been dogged by controversy since its launch in the fall of 2004. The initiative is perhaps best known for its sponsorship of "Freedom Walks" across the country, which urge Americans to "support the troops" in Afghanistan and Iraq and take place each year on the Sunday closest to September 11. The program is the brainchild of Allison Barber, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs. Her office oversees the DoD's PR machinery. It also is the conduit for government funding to *Stars and Stripes*.

*Stripes*'s editorial staff knew that the paper had some level of partnership with "America Supports You." The paper sells ASY memorabilia—lapel pins, bracelets, and the like—on its Web site, and has co-sponsored the "Freedom Walks." But members of *Stripes*'s senior editorial staff insist they had no idea that the paper was processing hundreds of thousands of dollars on behalf of the program.

There's not a lot of information on why "America Supports You," Barber, or the business-side folks at *Stars and Stripes*

conceived of or agreed to the plan. Tom Kelch, who retired as the paper's publisher in September, says he authorized the arrangement "years" ago to help Barber circumvent burdensome federal and Pentagon budget procedures.

On October 25, Schogol reported that an unnamed *Stripes* official said the funds handled by the paper on behalf of ASY were originally appropriated by Congress for other Pentagon programs. Although those involved deny that the arrangement bends or breaks spending rules, this would seem to run afoul of plain language in Pentagon regulations prohibiting the usage of *Stripes* money on other public-affairs projects.

One thing is clear: *Stripes*'s involvement has made it harder to track exactly how much money has been spent on "America Supports You." So far, the paper has only obtained and published documents showing \$810,650 worth of contracts. One, with Susan Davis International, a major PR firm, includes assistance with bringing entertainment to overseas troops, alongside domestic PR initiatives like public-service ads. The other is to build a Web site for ASY.

Kelch told CJR that he agreed to help ASY with entertainment, but that he had delegated most decisions on the matter to Max Lederer, now the acting publisher, and was unaware that contracts had been issued for Web design or public relations. "I guess I wasn't on the ball enough," he said. "I know that won't look good in print."

The largest known contract covered just four months of work in late 2006. Lederer has acknowledged that the paper's contracts on behalf of ASY are ongoing, and could continue through May 2008. That suggests that millions of dollars could have been, and will continue to be, funneled through the paper.

Lederer has declined to answer key questions posed by his own staff on the affair, and would not speak to CJR. He's also refused to turn over key documents to his own reporters. (According to one editor, Lederer's refusals have created other problems. Since the scandal broke, this editor says, *Stripes* reporters requesting unrelated documents from other sources have been rebuffed by people who say, "Why should I give you this stuff if your own paper won't?")

In mid-November, six mid-level editors sent Lederer a blistering statement, decrying his "stonewalling" and demanding his resignation. "The main part of my job is managing our reporters in war zones," says Joseph Giordano, the Middle East bureau chief and one of the letters' signatories. The reporters are "literally putting their life on the line each day for a publication they believe matters and for a readership that deserves a credible, independent product."

The story isn't over, says Grindstaff, who promises the paper will "report it as vigorously as any other." The inspector general's conclusions are expected in the spring. **CJR**



## Checkbook Journalism Revisited

*Sometimes we owe our sources everything*

IN NOVEMBER 1970, *ESQUIRE* PUBLISHED ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE COVERS in its history. Illustrating "The Confessions of Lt. Calley," the first of three articles about the man who, with his platoon, murdered hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai, it consisted of a photograph of Calley, in uniform and grinning broadly, surrounded by four adorable Asian children.

Perhaps one reason for Calley's smile was that *Esquire* had paid him \$20,000 (the equivalent of over \$100,000 today) to work with veteran journalist John Sack, who received \$10,000 for writing the articles. This wasn't the only instance in which *Esquire* paid the subject of a story: in 1963, the magazine had given Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) \$150 (\$1,000 today) to cooperate with a young journalist named Tom Wolfe for his article, "The Marvelous Mouth," which it published in its October issue.

That these two instances of "checkbook journalism" took place during the period when the legendary Harold Hayes edited *Esquire* makes me wonder: Can journalistic greatness coexist with a practice usually associated with celebrity magazines and tabloid television?

In the wake of the James Frey, Stephen Glass, and Jayson Blair scandals, journalists and journalism educators have become obsessed with the profession's ethics. While it is undoubtedly good that the profession is more self-conscious about its values, I worry that we sometimes emphasize it to a fault.

In particular, I fear my students are less concerned with getting great stories than maintaining their journalistic virtue. When I once advised a student that he didn't owe his cantankerous profile subject complete candor, he was aghast. "But Professor X told us that we must *always* be completely honest with our subjects," he protested. Cast in the role of ethical cretin, I tried, without much success, to explain that while deception wasn't one of Kant's universal ethical principles, it played an important role in journalism.

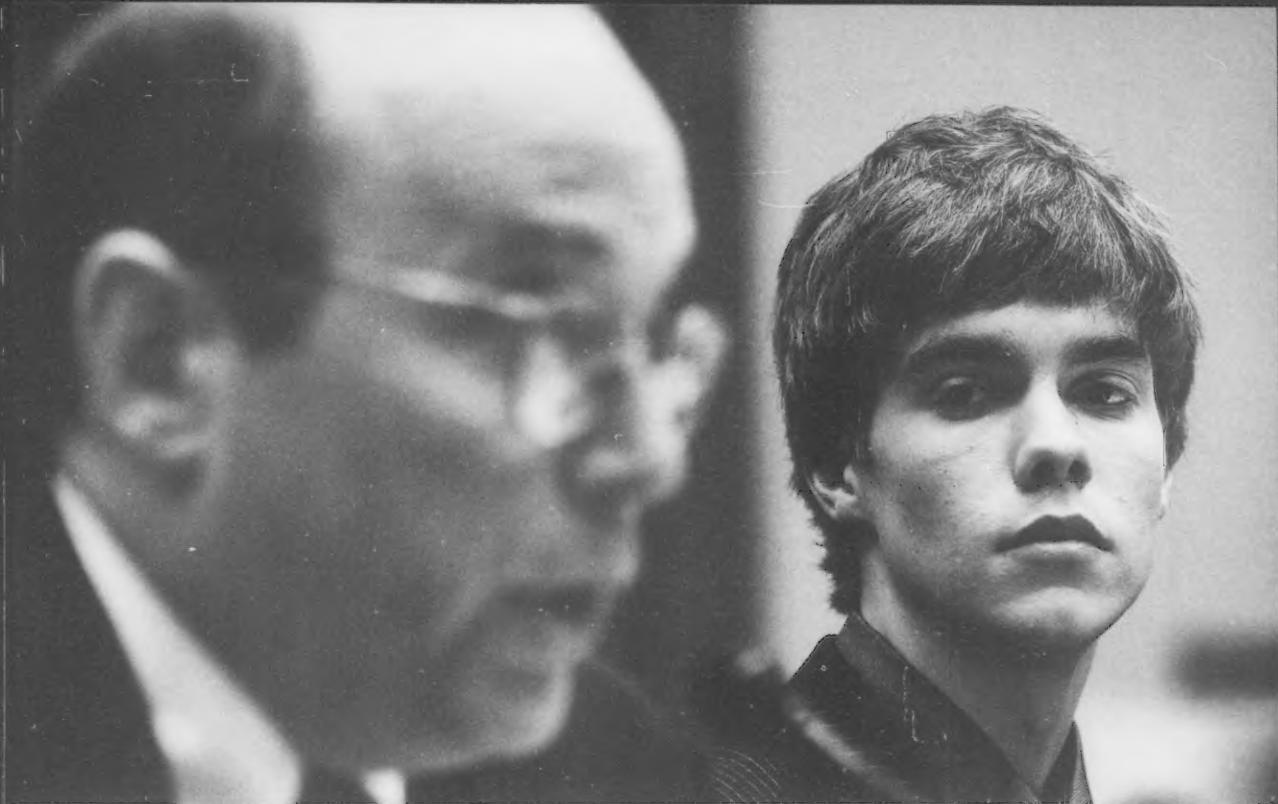
After the prohibitions against fabrication and plagiarism, there is no principle about which the ethics police are more absolutist than the one prohibiting any kind of exchange between a writer and the subject of his story. There is a sense that the time and energy a reporter puts into writing an article about someone is "payment" enough. A journalist who pays, or is paid by, a subject, the argument goes, compromises his objectivity and credibility. The mainstream media don't leave room for ambiguity. Reporters "may not pay for interviews or unpublished documents," reads the *New York Times* ethics handbook (September 2004). "The *Times* does not pay sources for information," says the *Los Angeles Times* Ethics Guidelines.

The standard argument against checkbook journalism is that paying for information creates an additional incentive for subjects to lie or embellish the truth. And even if a subject tells the truth, the fact that he's been paid undermines the journalist's position as a disinterested observer.

While I agree with this argument, I wonder whether it is equally true in every instance. It is obviously a bad idea for a daily reporter to go around handing out twenty-dollar bills to everyone he interviews. But what about the journalist who spends months, perhaps years, trailing his subjects? Do the daily reporter's ethical constraints apply when one is interviewing a character dozens of times over a long period, often depriving him of every shred of privacy? Does such a journalist—especially one working for highly remunerative magazines, whose books become best-sellers and perhaps even movies—really owe his subjects *nothing*? Is the difference between the rules guiding the daily reporter and the long-form writer one of degree or of kind?

IN THE OPENING LINES OF *THE JOURNALIST and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm labels journalism "morally indefensible" because of the unsavory means reporters use to convince people to cooperate. She's right, as far as it goes, but she's





**A blurred line** Justin Berry, right, and Kurt Eichenwald testify before Congress about Internet child pornography.

mistaken in her assumption that the benefits of journalism flow only toward the journalist. I'd argue that some form of mutual exchange is inherent in every substantial reporting project.

After all, people have an infinite number of motivations for talking to journalists. Some cooperate to publicize their message or movie; others want fame, possibly riches; still others desire revenge. And, of course, journalists share these motivations to one degree or another. How could they not? Are the desires of the people we write about really so different from ours? Regardless of the "currency"—whether emotional, ideological, or financial—journalism always involves a transaction of some kind.

Among the reasons journalists write, of course, is for the money. Having freelanced for a decade, I am as attuned as anyone to the role money plays in the life of a magazine writer. During that time, I was never in a position to pay anyone for cooperating, nor were most of the subjects of my pieces in need of compensation. So while I never discovered

whether money would influence them, I became an expert on the influence money had on me. Put simply, I love writing for money. Being paid is one of the things that distinguishes journalism from scholarship. It makes me feel, rightly or wrongly, that my work has more "purchase" on the world.

I thought a lot about the relationship between money and writing while doing the research for my book, *The New Journalism* (2005). The goal was to look at the state of long-form nonfiction by discussing craft with some of its finest practitioners. I was lucky to find some extremely forthcoming interlocutors, and just about the only time the conversation faltered was when the topic turned to money, due in part to my own uneasiness with the subject. After some version of the "I never pay for information" boilerplate, we'd move on. But those who didn't shirk from discussing money had some intriguing suggestions.

In the epilogue to his book *There Are No Children Here*, Alex Kotlowitz

explains that the poor, African-American family he wrote about agreed to cooperate with him without any promise of payment. A former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Kotlowitz was a firm believer that the journalist must keep his distance. But the intensity of this reporting project tested those beliefs. "I spent two years with this family, and everything I imagined about a subject-reporter relationship went out the window," he tells me. Kotlowitz would occasionally buy clothes for the two boys who were the focus of the book, or food for the household. "How could I not?" he says. Toward the end of his reporting, he began to think how he might assist the boys in a more long-term way. After completing the book, he used a percentage of the royalties to set up a trust fund. "I know there are some people who will say that I became too involved with the family, that I broke my pact as a journalist to remain detached and objective," he writes.

Jon Krakauer, the author of the best-sellers *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*,

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argues that there are occasions when a writer's subjects "deserve to be compensated for their contributions." For instance, while reporting *Under the Banner of Heaven*, he paid \$20,000 for the rights to a woman's memoir, though she had already provided him all the valuable information it contained. He recognized that he had benefited from the exchange, and wanted to help her in a way that wouldn't undermine the project's integrity. "She was dirt poor, and struggling to overcome some serious problems," he explains.

When Jonathan Harr, the author of the best-selling *A Civil Action*, wanted to write about an archaeological dig on the Turkish-Syrian border, the project's organizer requested a share of the revenue to help fund the dig itself. Harr felt it was a legitimate request and came up with a contract that specified that the archaeologists would profit from any movie that resulted from Harr's work, although not from the book or article itself. The deal was never completed because Harr ultimately decided it was too unwieldy.

As these writers attest, the question of what, whether, and when a journalist owes a source is never going to be obvious or straightforward. It is a discussion that takes place at the extremes of journalism, where the extraordinary duration and depth of the reporting put the writer-subject relationship on a different plane.

And for every Kotlowitz, Krakauer, and Harr, there is a Joe McGinnis, the best-selling author whose contractual relationship with Jeffrey MacDonald blew up in his face. In order to write *Fatal Vision*, an insider's account of MacDonald's 1983 murder trial, McGinnis agreed to share the proceeds of his book, going so far as to join the defense team. When McGinnis concluded that MacDonald was guilty after all, MacDonald sued him for fraud and breach of contract. That trial ended in a hung jury and McGinnis agreed to a substantial out-of-court payment to avoid a retrial.

More recently the ethics of former *New York Times* reporter Kurt Eichenwald's 2005 investigation of online child pornography were questioned when it emerged that he had sent the boy who ended up as the central character in the

piece a \$2,000 check and several smaller amounts via PayPal. Eichenwald insists that he sent the money out of concern for the boy's safety, and only later decided to write about him. His critics have suggested he blurred the line between concerned citizen and objective journalist. Whatever the truth of the matter, Eichenwald's situation illustrates the complications that arise when one introduces money into the journalist-source equation, even if the person in question is not yet a source and the journalist's intentions are noble.

One way to alleviate the ethical dilemma that comes from compensating a subject might be to publish more work under dual bylines—a practice frowned on by most serious magazines. Serious books often carry the names of two authors without slipping into the "as told to" gray zone of celebrity memoir. Although Sack's article about Lieutenant Calley didn't start off this way, it ended up credited as "by First Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr., interviewed by John Sack." I don't think the joint byline hurt either *Esquire* or Sack's reputation (even though the controversial content of the article cost the magazine \$200,000 in advertising). Another possibility is to pay the subject after the fact, although this makes the act of giving less one of compensation than of charity. Again, disclosure is the key to any such arrangement.

My point is not that journalists should routinely compensate their sources. In the vast majority of cases, they shouldn't. As professional skeptics, though, we should be suspicious of the knee-jerk way in which journalists invoke the "no money for information" rule. How convenient that our personal gain and our profession's ethical principles are so perfectly aligned! Isn't it possible that this prohibition is simultaneously true and a way of banishing awkward questions of money and exchange from our moral calculations? In the murky intimacy that comes with immersion reporting, we owe our sources everything. Perhaps this is why we try so hard to avoid the topic. **CJR**

ROBERT S. BOYNTON is the director of New York University's magazine writing program and author of *The New New Journalism*.

## Keeping Poverty on the Page

Covering an old problem in new ways

POVERTY SHOULD BE IN REPORTERS' CROSSHAIRS THIS COMING YEAR, AS IT WILL be a central issue in the presidential campaign, at least for certain candidates. John Edwards visited a street in South Carolina that still has outhouses. Barack Obama spoke in Clarendon County in the same state, where one of the first lawsuits that led to *Brown v. Board of Education* was filed. He said, "We're going to have to reclaim in our own lives the belief that I am my brother's keeper." How can a reporter cover that most persistent of problems, poverty, today without making it boring and predictable, or guilt-tripping readers and turning them off? Do you focus on one injustice—say, a corrupt housing authority—or try to connect the dots and cover all of the reasons, both individual and systemic, that poverty is entrenched in certain places in America? Mary Ellen Schoonmaker, an editorial-board member at *The Record* in northern New Jersey, asked *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne Jr., a political writer who has his eye on poverty, to suggest some ways to return it to front-page status at our news organizations.



### Guilt is good

"There's a problem when poor people are in the paper more for committing crimes than doing the right thing."

**How can local reporters, who are not on the trail with John Edwards or anyone else, link what some of the candidates are saying about poverty to coverage in their own back yards?** People talk all the time about media bias. I actually think there's a structural bias in the media against the poor. Newspapers are built to cover the wealthy and the famous much more than they are built to cover the working class or the poor. There are entire business sections devoted to what the people running big companies do. There are whole sections that focus on gossip about celebrities and rich sports figures. There are good reasons why all these sections exist, but taken together, this is a very large commitment on the part of journalists to a particular slice of society. There is no part of the newspaper routinely devoted to the coverage of the problems of poor people, or struggling working-class—or even middle-class—people. So anyone who cares about covering these matters knows he or she has to fight this structural issue. That said, a lot of these stories are very compelling stories. Jim Wallis,

the progressive evangelical, invented a whole category of voters from a visit to a Burger King where he saw a mom working behind the counter while two of her kids were doing their homework. He called her a "Burger King mom." She was doing everything society said she should because we don't provide universal childcare, and because people in lower-end service jobs don't have flexibility with their time—there were her kids doing their homework. I think the stories of folks like that are very compelling to readers. I think stories illustrating what these numbers about the lack of health-care coverage mean, or what the imposition of higher co-pays or insurance costs mean to actual people, are compelling stories. I have been a political reporter for a long time, and this critique applies as much to me as to anyone else. We probably don't do enough to take these abstract issues and explain them in light of people's actual experiences. And I think that can be done at every newspaper in the country, and indeed reporters on local papers may be in a position to do a better job of this than those of us so focused on the horse race of the presidential election.

**Given this "structural bias," what can one reporter—or one editor—do to fight it?** Journalism is rooted in the faith that a single reporter can make a difference. It often happens in the case of stories about political or financial corruption and in stories calling attention to serious public problems that have been ignored. I think it's possible for a reporter to encourage a community to give more thought to issues related to poverty, and perhaps to think about them differently. It's important to make a case that there is a "but for the grace of God go I" aspect to many of these stories. Readers who are not poor can relate especially to stories in which they could imagine themselves if their luck ran out, or if they were born into different circumstances. And because many people these days who aren't poor feel under various financial pressures, there are ways to link their situations to the situations of the poor.

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**Can you do it in a way that doesn't make people feel guilty, or that they have heard it all before?** Maybe this just proves that I'm Catholic, but I don't think there's anything wrong with making people feel guilty; I think we should have a sense of guilt or, if you prefer, a responsibility about this suffering in our midst. In terms of whether this turns people off, there are books that have been best-sellers that call our attention to this. One thinks of the classic, *The Other America*, by Michael Harrington, which had an enormous effect in making us pay attention to the poor. There are Barbara Ehrenreich's books [such as *Nickel and Dime*] that were very compelling to a lot of people. So I don't think this coverage turns people off, nor does it all have to be downbeat. A lot of stories about the poor are heroic stories of people who despite the odds are trying to do the right thing. There's a problem when poor people get in the paper more for committing crimes than for doing the right thing.

**How do we do it in a way that doesn't feed this attitude that the poor are somehow to blame for their plight?**

I don't see anything wrong with explaining that poverty is very complicated and that there is personal responsibility here as well as the social problems and racism that are involved in creating poverty. If you take some of the great writers, recently, about poverty—I think of Alex Kotlowitz or Jason DeParle—they're really honest about the complexity of this; that poor people make mistakes just like everyone else. The breakdown of the family is a real problem that we shouldn't shy away from covering. It shouldn't be done in a propagandistic way, but in a way that calls the public's attention to these problems and makes them part of the larger dialogue. The person who covers poverty right most consistently and I think courageously is Bob Herbert of *The New York Times*.

**But don't you think that this dialogue about the poor has been largely diminished in recent years, that since 9/11,**

**national attention has turned toward a very insular defense of "us against them"?** I think there are fads and vogues in journalism; there always have been. I think there are moments when certain stories push their way up front, and often for good reason. It made perfect sense after 9/11 to have the media spend an awful lot of time on terrorism. But things change and people go back to, or forward to, other interests, and I think Americans still care about the story of terrorism, but I don't think this drives all the coverage, or for that matter all our politics, anymore. I also think that we have to be candid that what journalists do is in many ways reactive to what is happening in the political environment, and I think it's been awhile since people in our political realm were willing to push poverty up front, particularly in a presidential campaign. The late Paul Wellstone [the senator from Minnesota], before he died, tried to do it with his poverty tour, where he retraced Bobby Kennedy's steps. Certainly John Edwards has made this a major theme of his campaign, and I think Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are doing that to a degree—both have given serious poverty speeches. And in Congress, with the S-CHIP debate, for example, the state children's health-insurance program, you're opening up on a national level, day after day after day, a debate about how poor and lower-middle-class and middle-class kids get, or do not get, health care. So I think the environment now is more conducive to real coverage of these problems and this issue than it was just two or three years ago.

**There was a compelling series recently in *The Buffalo News* that explored the story behind new census figures that show Buffalo is the second-poorest large city in America, and almost half its children live in poverty. What does it mean to go to bed hungry, to be hungry when you get home from school and there's nothing to eat? The paper focused on individual children to humanize the issue. It was powerful stuff, but then they interviewed the mayor, and he said some-**



thing like, Oh, yes, we've got all these projects in the pipeline, and we're developing, and we're going to come back as a city, etc., and it ultimately left me unsatisfied. Will anything change? Where is the outrage? Should journalism be more willing to tell people that they should be angry about situations like this? You know the one place where you did see that happen was Hurricane Katrina. It is true that after a burst of interest in the chronic poverty that Katrina exposed there is much less interest now, much less coverage of what is happening down there. But I, like a lot of people, was struck at how visibly angry reporters on the ground got about how people were being treated. It really was almost a muckraking style, and it wasn't ideological; it was just, there's a human outrage here. I do think that in the period immediately after 9/11, there was a kind of patriotic style of coverage, and I understand that, because we all felt that the United States was under attack, and there was a sense of solidarity in the country. But that cannot dominate journalism for long without journalism having a problem, and I think you're seeing a move again toward a more critical style of coverage.

**But wasn't the much-praised Katrina coverage actually an anomaly?** Katrina was powerful because it combined a huge natural disaster (such stories always get covered) with a huge social catastrophe. Social catastrophes get far less coverage. So it is not surprising that Katrina was the exception. But again, I think we should be candid about vogues in journalism, how a whole series of factors can come together to create an interest in a topic. In the early 1960s, it was the combination of John F. Kennedy campaigning in West Virginia and seeing how much poverty there was, and Dwight MacDonald's review of Mike Harrington's book in *The New Yorker* that came to Kennedy's attention, and Lyndon Johnson's own moral sense about poverty and the civil-rights movement, which moved from a focus on the rights of African Americans to the opportunities, or lack thereof, that

all African Americans had. So you had a whole lot of factors coming together. I think now what you have coming together is obviously Hurricane Katrina, a sense on the part of some politicians at least that poverty is a problem that should be discussed nationally, and a real concern among the middle class about rising inequality and what it means for the country and for democracy, and that their own circumstances are more fragile than they should be.

**The Buffalo News series was not about advocacy. Its role was to "be the spotlight on the problem, not an actor on the stage." Does this surprise you?**

On the one hand, because I care about these issues, I would love to see the paper crusade. On the other hand, I think there is something very valuable about saying, "We're not going to dictate how you look at this." There is a case to be made for good reporting that is not linked to advocacy. Yes, editorial pages are supposed to advocate, but I think a lot of people never believe you when you say that the editorial side of the paper is independent of the news side, when at the vast majority of papers it actually is.

**Because most reporters are middle class, like our readers, are there biases that we bring—blind spots—that get in our way when we write about poverty?**

My conservative friends say the media are biased, liberal, and in fact I think the bias in the media is one of the educated, middle- to upper-middle class. So if there's a bias on social issues, it's more liberal, but if there's a bias on economic issues, it tends to be slightly conservative. I joke that the two things you don't want to be in confronting a reporter are an evangelical preacher or a trade-union shop steward. Having said that, the best journalists have a kind of empathetic ability, the ability to see the world not just from their own perspective but from somebody else's perspective. At its best, journalism is an interaction between an empathetic view and a critical view, which is: How does the world look from this perspective. And viewed a little bit

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from the outside, does that perspective make sense or not? Does it always work? No. But when it does, it can produce some great journalism.

**What are some aspects of the poverty issue that are under-covered and too important to ignore?** To the extent that poverty is linked to high crime rates, a whole community has an interest in doing something. School failure is a huge issue because it blocks kids from rising out of poverty. School success, by the way, is also important and almost never covered. The impact of poverty on people's health—and the health costs this can impose on a community—is important. We also need a lot more coverage of family breakdown and single-parent families, to figure out more about the connection between family structure and poverty and what can be done about it. It's a problem not easily dealt with through public policy. It's important to show why jobs may be harder to find in inner-city communities than in suburban areas. It's important to show that the poor often lack transportation to travel from where they live to where the jobs are.

**How can a reporter keep the people in a story on poverty from becoming one-dimensional, simply the sum of their problems? Do poverty stories always have to be grim?** Poverty stories don't have to be grim. We don't write often enough about solutions, about programs or agencies that work—and explain to readers why they work. We don't write often enough about people who work with the poor. There are many religious organizations that do amazing work, and whose commitment is something many in a community can relate to. There are affluent churches and synagogues that partner with houses of worship in less-affluent parts of their communities. These are often settings in which the well-off and the less well-off relate to each other in human ways, and not as "caregivers" and "clients." And the poor often have a sense of humor about their own condition, which can create a spark of recognition in readers. **CJR**

## ON THE JOB CHRIS MOONEY

### Blogonomics

*Bloggers of the world, unite!*

AS A JOURNALIST AND ESPECIALLY AS A BLOGGER, I SURE PICKED A HELL OF a time to move to Los Angeles. No sooner did I settle here late last fall than my fellow writers in the film and television industries went on strike. I've never done their kind of writing in a professional capacity, but the more I've engaged with the issues at the center of the current dispute between the Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, the more I'm convinced that bloggers could soon find themselves making similar complaints against their own employers.

Yes, dear reader: the Bloggers Guild of America may be on its way. The dispute between screen and television writers and media conglomerates has its roots, after all, in the Web. The sweeping changes it has impelled in the media over the past decade or so have made film and TV writers feel less in control of the products of their labor. The current strike is the culmination of that: the writers are fighting for additional compensation when a product they've created for film or TV is distributed in some form over the Internet. Their current compensation? Nothing.

Bloggers often earn that same salary. There are exceptions, of course, those fortunate few who have become quasi-celebrities in their own right and found themselves, and their sites, snatched up by major media companies (which in some cases are owned by the same large conglomerates that the Hollywood writers are, as of this writing, striking against). These big media outlets are making money from the Web traffic that bloggers bring, via the online advertisements that that traffic helps to sell.

And blog traffic is growing. According to Technorati, which compares blogs with mainstream media Web sites using "inbound blog sources" (e.g., measuring how much a site is being linked to by other sites), the biggest media sites—nytimes.com, cnn.com—still have more linkage cred than any blog. But the blogs are catching up: in the fourth quarter of 2006, Boing Boing, a collaborative blog, had about a fourth as many inbound blog sources as nytimes.com (19,438 to 83,740), and The Huffington Post and Daily Kos had over an eighth as many (12,703 and 11,093, respectively). Tellingly, both The Huffington Post and Daily Kos were slightly ahead of *The Economist's* site—and considerably ahead of *The New Yorker's*. Even more tellingly, on Technorati's list of the hundred most-linked information sources, twenty-two were blogs.

But blogs aren't just part of the proverbial marketplace of ideas; they're also part of the plain old marketplace—and site viewership, of course, translates into ad sales. (Profits add up quickly: A single, week-long, premium-slot ad run on

Daily Kos, according to Blogads, sells for \$9,000.) As top-tier blogs, in particular, become increasingly profitable, it will be fair to ask just how much of their proceeds are going to the writers who, ultimately, make it all possible.

Which is not to say that the answers—or even the questions—will be easy. How, for example, do you define and otherwise distinguish “bloggers” themselves? Bloggers are an (in)famously diverse bunch: grouping them isn’t just grouping apples and oranges, but apples and oranges and bananas and the occasional kumquat. There are the Andrew Sullivans, for instance, whose blogs are acquired by major media outlets (in Sullivan’s case, first *Time*, then the *Atlantic*). They become, essentially, contract workers—sometimes even staff members. If and when they do, an at least somewhat recognizable form of journalistic (or freelance journalistic) economics kicks in. As a freelancer myself, for example—though not at Sullivan’s level—I’ve negotiated contracts with several blog sites to contribute regularly and be paid per contribution. The rates for such work can rival or even exceed online writing for, say, political magazines—and it tends to be far easier work, given the informality of blog-style writing, its generally minimal reporting requirements, and its lack of much editorial oversight (which is, after all, contrary to the spirit of blogging).

But most bloggers aren’t as high-profile as Sullivan or don’t come from a journalistic background. They’re not being hired, nor are they freelancing in the traditional sense. They’re political activists or college students or professors or celebrities, or simply opinionated and informed citizens. In many cases, they have day jobs (or are retired) and blog for “fun” or out of devotion to a cause. They don’t expect to be paid well, if at all—or they don’t know that they *should* expect it.

These types of bloggers comprise a significant part of the core content base of economically significant sites like Daily Kos, The Huffington Post, and ScienceBlogs (where I maintain a regular blog). And current standards for their compensation are hardly uniform. The Huffington Post, for instance, recently came under fire when cofounder Ken

## Blog sites are starting to make money. The bloggers should see some of it.

Lerer told *USA Today* that the site’s “financial model” did not involve ever paying bloggers. There’s a similar lack of compensation for writing “diaries” at Daily Kos. ScienceBlogs, by contrast, pays bloggers invited to join the network based on their traffic.

In short, it’s a Wild West out there for bloggers—even though, without them, the Internet’s frontier would not have expanded so broadly or so rapidly. And even though, without them, the Web-derived profits many of these blog sites are starting to rake in simply wouldn’t exist.

At the same time, though, there’s sense in diversity when it comes to compensation: not all bloggers should be treated equally with respect to remuneration. Most bloggers, after all, don’t draw very much traffic; neither are they part of a blogging conglomerate that is making real money selling advertisements. Were bloggers to organize, a threshold would have to be established between blogging “for fun” and blogging in a way that should be considered “labor”—between amateurs and professionals, if you will.

Such distinctions are hardly unprecedented—the Writers Guild of America, after all, does not include everyone with a screenplay squirreled away in his sock drawer. That’s why it’s a *guild*—you have to be a professional to be a member and reap the benefits. Something similar could happen for the blogosphere. As Nancy Lynn Schwartz relates in her history of the writers guild, *The Hollywood Writers’ Wars*, initial organizing was undertaken by an already successful group of writers—the Andrew Sullivans, as it were, of Hollywood in the 1930s.

It’s possible and even desirable, I think, that the same may eventually

happen for blogging, perhaps under the auspices of the existing National Writers Union, which recently voted to make organizing bloggers a priority. I imagine it something like this: the most successful writers take the initiative to organize, because they’re the ones who will actually be listened to by employers. Then, they’ll set up a structure that separates the workhorse bloggers (those who make large collective sites like Daily Kos and The Huffington Post possible) from the pure “hobbyists.” Whatever these distinctions may be, they should have nothing to do with whether or not the blogger in question has another salary from another job. (Not all writers in the guild work full-time on TV and screen writing, but all are equally protected.)

A bloggers guild could also, of course, work to protect bloggers’ intellectual property and help ensure they’re compensated for it. In 2001, the Supreme Court heard *The New York Times Co. v. Tasini*, in which six freelance writers took on publications that had run their work in print, paying them for the copyright, and then republished that work in online databases. In a 7–2 vote, the Court found in favor of the freelancers, ruling that writers should be compensated for work published online in addition to their print compensation. It takes only the tiniest of logical leaps to apply this ruling to the work of bloggers.

The paradigm shifts we’re in the midst of—in media usage and, then, in standards of intellectual property—demand that we rethink not just what writers contribute to the media marketplace, but also how they should be compensated for their contributions. Individual blogs, and Web sites hosting large numbers of bloggers, are profiting—not just culturally and intellectually, but economically—from bloggers’ work. Organizing, in that sense, seems not only inevitable, but necessary; “professional” bloggers need to be compensated for their work. It’s only fair. **CJR**

CHRIS MOONEY writes *The Intersection* blog with Sheril Kirshenbaum ([scienceblogs.com/intersection](http://scienceblogs.com/intersection)) and is the author of two books, *The Republican War on Science* and *Storm World: Hurricanes, Politics, and the Battle Over Global Warming*.

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# Secrets of the City

*What The Wire reveals about urban journalism*

BY LAWRENCE LANAHAN

## **Baltimore via Wide Angle**

High up on a pole, under a police decal spelling out CITIWATCH and a flashing blue light, the security camera on Calverton Road captures something unusual on the streets of west Baltimore this bright summer morning—a man in a suit standing at a podium. It's election time, and for Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr., a candidate for mayor, this

corner symbolizes the city's biggest concern: crime. He stands in front of Club International, where five months earlier a pair of patrons who had been kicked out for urinating on the dance floor are accused of returning with a gun to murder the bouncer. Baltimore—already legendary for violent crime—has seen a 14 percent increase in homicides and a 24 percent increase in nonfatal shootings over the same period in 2006. On July 30, a man who had been shot just blocks from Mayor Sheila Dixon's house approached her security detail for help. Four weeks later, a man shot while driving his SUV plowed through a concrete wall and met his maker at the bottom of a swimming pool in the back yard of Baltimore's most famous defense attorney, Warren Brown.

Passing buses occasionally drown out Mitchell's amplified words, but through the clamor his solution emerges: four hundred extra police officers and a 15 percent raise for the whole force. More murder? More cops. A simple problem. A

simple solution. Yet on the corner across the street from the hubbub, where I'm standing with several residents, the situation seems more complicated than that. Everyone starts talking at once: how hard it is to pay for utilities and prescriptions on a fixed income; how few after-school programs, libraries, and summer jobs are left; how promised playgrounds and recreation centers never arrive; how the media only show the neighborhood in a negative light; how the politicians only come around when they're trying to get elected.

The further back I step, the sadder the scene looks. Mitchell is talking to three television cameras, a handful of reporters, and another man in a suit, and from this perspective, the wider concrete and asphalt desolation just swallows them.

It could be a scene from *The Wire*, particularly this year. The fifth and final season of David Simon's dramatic HBO series will focus on the newsroom of a fictional paper called, like the real one, the *Sun*. *The Wire*, although fictional, explores an increasingly brutal and coarse society through the prism of Baltimore, where postindustrial capitalism has decimated the working-class wage and sharply divided the haves and have-nots. The city's bloated bureaucracies sustain the inequality. The absence of a decent public-school education or meaningful political reform leaves an unskilled underclass trapped between a rampant illegal drug economy and a vicious "war on drugs." In the final season, Simon asks why we aren't getting the message. Why can't we achieve meaningful reform? What are we telling ourselves about ourselves? To get at these questions, he wants us to see the city from the perspective of a shrinking newsroom.

Back in 1983, Simon was thrilled to land a job at the *Sun*. He says he had been an ink-stained-wretch-in-waiting ever since he was twelve, when his father—a former newsman himself—took him to a production of *The Front Page*. Simon joined his high school paper and later became editor-in-chief of *The Diamondback* at the University of Maryland. While he was in college, he says, he filed so many stories as a suburban stringer for the *Sun* that he was forced to graduate more than a year late. Then suddenly there he was: a full-time gig in the house of Mencken and Manchester. He had an enormous respect for the *Sun*, and he pounded his beat eagerly.

The job lasted twelve years, and Simon became increasingly disillusioned toward the end. In 1995, he angrily ditched the *Sun* and went to television, where he dedicated himself to telling the world how screwed up it was, layer by layer. And now he turns his eye back to journalism, giving us something to ponder: Why is a newspaperman-at-heart devoting the final ten hours of one of the most acclaimed television dramas in history to the role of journalism in the decline of the American empire?

### A Story Without a Villain

The offices of Simon's Blown Deadline Productions sit on an isolated waterfront street in Canton, a historically working-class Baltimore neighborhood. Canton's brick factories now house retail stores and condos, but Simon's office is in the one section where there is still active industry. Across the harbor, the Port of Baltimore's epic blue cranes gleam in the sun.

Fans of *The Wire* would recognize these cranes from the

second season, a rumination on the decline of the working class, set at a stevedores' union. The first season focused tightly on a wiretap investigation of a major drug organization, as if it were a police procedural. But the addition of the union revealed Simon's true intent: he was building a city. By the end of season two, he had explored the criminal-justice system, the drug organizations, and the port. The third season added city hall, the churches, and the public-health sector. The fourth season added the school system, academia, nonprofits, and the inner-city family.

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**'I admire journalism  
where I actually see a  
nuanced world.'**

**—David Simon**

Simon was writing a televised novel, and a big one. Innumerable subplots came and went, and main characters disappeared from the show for several episodes at a time. Nothing ever resolved itself in an hour, and there were no good guys or bad guys. All were individuals constrained by their institutions, driven to compromise between conscience, greed, and ambition. Facets of their characters emerged slowly over time. They spoke in the sometimes-unintelligible vernaculars of their subcultures. All of this made unprecedented demands on viewers and provided an immense reward to those who stuck around. A righteous anger at the failure of our social institutions drives *The Wire*, but the passionate ideas that fuel it are hidden several layers down.

In early September, I visited Simon's office in Canton. The crew had just wrapped filming on the final episode, and the lobby was cluttered with boxes and plastic-wrapped wardrobe. Simon arrived wearing a black-and-white Hawaiian shirt and Ray-Bans pushed back over his bald head. He took coffee orders from his staff, and we drove to a nearby Starbucks. Mardi Gras beads dangled from Simon's rearview mirror, and Liam Clancy and Theltonious Monk played on the stereo.

This was Simon at ease. He has a great sense of humor and loves a good yarn. But when we sat down at a conference table to talk about his career at the *Sun*, Simon was taut and focused, sometimes twisting a paper clip or drawing perfect 3-D boxes on a legal pad. He is still passionate about journalism, and when his frustrations surface he uncorks a blue streak worthy of his fictionalized detectives and drug dealers.

When the *Sun* hired Simon immediately out of college, he didn't know Baltimore at all, and the cop beat would not have been his choice, but he worked his tail off. "I filed three hundred bylines in my first year," Simon says. And though he was green, his colleagues found him fully formed as a reporter and a writer. "He was writing about the sociology of the city through the prism of the cop beat

and the criminal-justice system," says Rebecca Corbett, his first editor, now an editor in the Washington bureau of *The New York Times*. "And he fairly uniquely looked at the people who we tend to view just as victims or bad guys, and looked at these neighborhoods as real places that we had better understand."

Simon began to hit his stride after a five-part series in 1987 on notorious drug lord "Little Melvin" Williams. (Williams, five years out of prison, now plays a deacon on *The Wire*.) Then he asked Police Commissioner Edward Tilghman if he could spend a year shadowing the homicide department for a book. Surprisingly, Tilghman said yes, as did Simon's editors, and in 1988 Simon took fifteen months off to report *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1991.

That same year, The Times Mirror Company, which had bought the *Sun* from the A. S. Abell Co. in 1986, lured John Carroll away from the *Lexington Herald-Leader* to edit the *Sun*. "The paper had problems that needed to be solved," Simon says, and he was excited to see Carroll come on board. Carroll's stellar reputation as a protégé of Gene Roberts at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had preceded him, and Simon believed that the *Sun* would have the ingredients—*Sun* veterans, talented new hires, new leadership, and flush finances—to produce first-class journalism.

In 1993, Simon took a second book leave, this time to observe the war on drugs from one of the roughest neighborhoods in Baltimore for *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, which he co-wrote with retired Baltimore homicide detective and current *Wire* co-producer Ed Burns. Shortly after Simon left, Carroll brought in Bill Marimow, a colleague from the *Inquirer*, as metro editor at the *Sun*, and Marimow quickly rose to managing editor. Out on the streets, Simon was developing a fuller vision of where he wanted to go as a journalist. The cops and crime beat, it turned out, was the best thing that ever happened to him, and he thought that his two year-long, book-reporting excursions had revealed deeper truths about why the city was the way it was. He felt ready to address its complexity.

Simon returned briefly from book leave to write a four-part series called "Crisis in Blue" for the *Sun*, about a dysfunctional police department. At the time, Baltimore had registered a record number of homicides the previous year, and a new police commissioner was about to take the helm of a department in decline. It was a sprawling subject, but Simon found the numbers to focus and quantify it: crime was up 37 percent, yet arrest rates were down for violent crime because the felony divisions had been depleted to fill the ranks at homicide. Simon captured the qualitative nuance through his deep reservoir of sources in the department and on the street: robbery victims who never heard back from the police; a junkie rotating from the corner to the courthouse five times in six months only to receive a verdict of probation before judgment; detectives who advocated for a unit to target violent drug rings only to get transferred because they had deviated from the street-level arrest orthodoxy. Simon had the historical grasp to show the progression from a well-respected department full of disciplined Vietnam veterans through twenty years of

"planned attrition" to a disorganized, underpaid force that was moonlighting to pay the bills. His sociological eye caught the systemic flaws in a futile drug war: a patrol cop collecting court pay for six cases in one day while his collars walked out with probation; the irony of the fact that neighborhood activists' demands to clean up the corners led to mass arrests of users while the repeat offenders who brought the drugs to town and did the murders walked free.

For an exposé of a failing police department, "Crisis in Blue" is remarkably free of villains. The reader finds not just individual actors making bad decisions, but a fatally flawed system that those actors struggle to accommodate. Reporting from the front lines of the war on drugs taught Simon everything he needed to know about that system. "How can you report on a place like Baltimore, where one of every two black males is without work," he said, "and in any way regard the economic structure as being viable?"

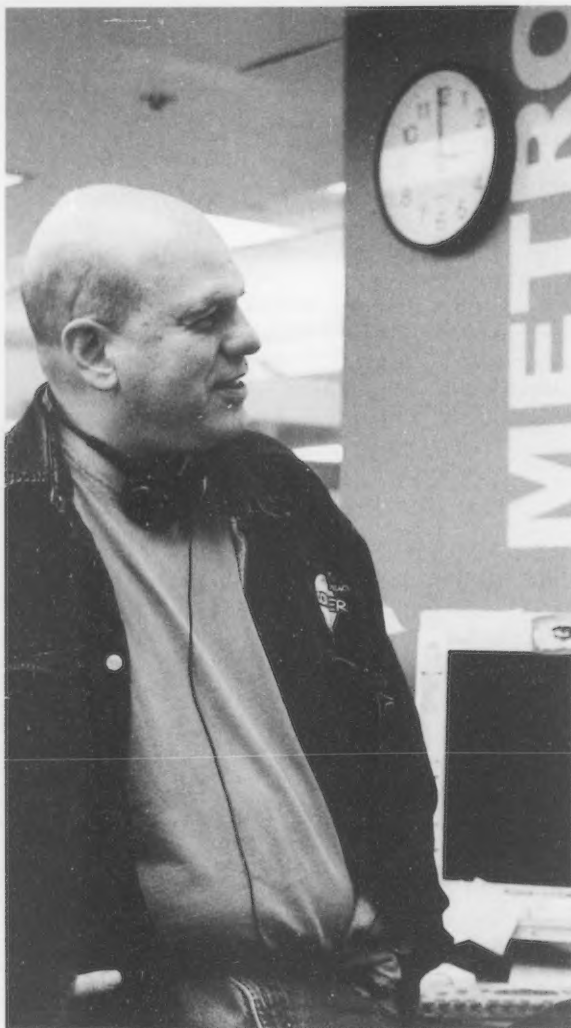
#### A 'Rule for the New Millennium'

The outline of Baltimore's decline can be seen in the numbers. Over the last thirty years or so, the city lost 28 percent of its population, and manufacturing jobs declined from 20 percent of available work to 8 percent. In 2006, 19.5 percent of Baltimoreans lived in poverty, and, as of 2000, 43.4 of blacks were absent from the labor force (the city is 64.4 percent black). Poverty is a fact of life for 22.9 percent of blacks, 30.6 percent of black children, and almost half of all female-headed black households with children five years old and younger. Only 35 percent of Baltimore students graduate high school within four years. It has the nation's second highest increase in new AIDS cases. A massive drug economy serves an estimated 50,000 addicts, and there are roughly that number of vacant housing units. And Baltimore's 2006 homicide rate of 43.3 per 100,000 residents was one of the highest in the country, behind only five cities, including New Orleans and Detroit.

The difference between, say, west Baltimore's Boyd-Booth neighborhood and Roland Park in leafy north Baltimore is shocking. According to the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, the juvenile arrest rate in Boyd-Booth's census statistical area is 206 per 1,000 residents. In Roland Park, it's 1.6. All the comparisons are staggering. Median household income: \$23,070 to \$64,571. Percent of employed working-age adults: 46.1 to 76.1. Domestic violence rate per 1,000: 68 to 1.9. Median home sale price: \$33,750 to \$235,000. Percent of residential properties that are vacant: 19.9 to 0.1. Absentee rate in tenth grade: 81.5 percent to 16.7 percent. Teen birth rate per 1,000: 117 to 0.

Baltimore cannot be replicated: the liberating weirdness, the lunch-pail ethic of the Colts and Cal Ripken, the peculiar conversations of hundreds of barfly-savants, the seafood, the accents.... It's a lovable city. It really is. Nonetheless, it is two cities. More than one former *Sun* reporter gave me the same spiel: You can live in Roland Park, drive down St. Paul Street to your office at Legg Mason or T. Rowe Price, and life is sweet. But go several blocks to the east or west, and the "Land of Pleasant Living" quickly becomes "Bodymore, Murdaland."





**A tale of two Suns** David Simon on the set of *The Wire*, in a fictional Baltimore metro daily named after the real one where he worked as a reporter for twelve years.

It's not quite fair, however, to lump all of blighted east and west Baltimore together. It is still a city of neighborhoods, and there are nuances. Many people still love the place. The corner of Baltimore and Calverton, for instance, where mayoral candidate Keiffer Mitchell spoke of decay, was recently a symbol of renewal. The neighborhood, Boyd-Booth, was typical of Baltimore's early 1990s heroin-and-murder-driven nadir. But using a new law against "nuisance properties" and a plan implemented by a coalition of police and community groups, this neighborhood achieved a 52 percent reduction in violent crime and an 80 percent decrease in drug arrests from 1993 to 1995.

The complex Baltimore of Boyd-Booth is the Baltimore that Simon has chosen to document, and his reporting on the streets revealed to him the "wire" that eventually informed

*The Wire*: it threads through both "our" lives and "their" lives. Simon believes that we've agreed as a country that our economy can thrive without 8 to 10 percent of the population. Thus, in his view, those without the education and skills to get by are inevitably going to turn to the only viable economy in their neighborhoods—the drug trade. To contain that problem and its attendant violence, he believes, the war on drugs has morphed into a war on the underclass. In both the viable and unviable America, Simon argues, capital is more valued than human lives, whether you're an expendable tout in a drug organization, a cop trying to put good police work over statistics, a stevedore trying to pull in a full week of union wages, a teacher trying to educate rather than teach to the test, or, as the new season of *The Wire* argues, a reporter trying to capture the complexity of urban life rather than haul in sound bites.

In March 1995, Simon finished his work on *The Corner* and returned to the *Sun*. He began writing narratives from the point of view of his subjects, judging his own work on whether a subject would recognize the truth of his life on the page. "I admire journalism where I actually see a nuanced world with complex human beings captured," Simon says. Journalism, he thinks, should bring "real life and real issues through the keyhole" in a way that leads to "meaningful thought, if not action."

But Simon wouldn't achieve his ideal at the *Sun*. In May 1995, Times Mirror installed former General Mills executive Mark Willes as CEO. When Times Mirror bought the *Sun* in 1986, the chain was regarded as fairly benign, but when the "Cereal Killer," as Willes came to be known, gave a speech to reporters on Calvert Street "about product and product share," Simon lost hope. "We sat there listening, thinking, 'Is this guy going to mention the elemental public trust?'"

To Simon, the indifferent logic of Wall Street has poisoned the relationship between newspapers and their cities. Simon says he only sees two fixes: some kind of quasi-public business model, and some new way for newspapers to charge for all the content they deliver free on the Internet. But then he adds one more: "Third would be that nobody thinks about winning a prize until December 1. Because if that thought is in your head prior to the end of the year, about what you need to do to win a prize, you're an asshole, and you're part of the problem."

What he sees as a prize mentality is what ultimately drove Simon from the *Sun*. To him, the institution was being corrupted from within as well as without. Although Simon considers John Carroll's 2005 stand against corporate cutbacks at the *Los Angeles Times* to have been noble, the Carroll-Marimow reign at the *Sun* had increasingly enraged him. Simon saw their approach as a formula for winning Pulitzer Prizes: "Surround a simple outrage, overreport it, claim credit for breaking it, make sure you find a villain, then claim you effected change as a result of your coverage. Do it in a five-part series, and make sure you get 'the Baltimore *Sun* has learned' in the second graph."

Simon believes that approach is reductive, giving complex problems the illusion of simplicity. Just six months after returning from book leave, Simon packed his bags, having



absorbed what he calls his "rule for the new millennium": any institution will eventually betray those who serve it and those it is meant to serve. He definitely included Carroll and Marimow's prize-winning *Sun*. He used the word "venal."

### One Layer Down

I highly advise that you never get between David Simon and John Carroll or Bill Marimow. Rafael Alvarez, a friend of Simon's who wrote for *The Wire* and worked with him at the *Sun*, told me that exploring this difference—separating "the business end from the personal end," as he said—would be exceedingly hard because the two are intertwined. "It's like asking people about a divorce," he said. "It's very complicated."

Carroll and Marimow are two of the most highly regarded journalists in the country. The *Sun's* bold reporting and lively storytelling won praise from this very magazine in the late 1990s. Marimow won a Pulitzer as a reporter in Philly and his reporting led to another for the paper, and the *Los Angeles Times* won thirteen under Carroll's leadership. If the possession of a Pulitzer means that one exemplifies the ideals of the profession, Simon is basically criticizing the entire world of newspapering.

He doesn't always deliver that criticism with a light touch. In April, a friend of mine was scheduled to participate in a storytelling series called "The Stoop" at a Baltimore arts organization called Creative Alliance, and it turned out that Simon was on the bill, too, so I went. The theme was "My Nemesis," and after six fantastic tales, Simon stepped to the stage in an untucked black shirt and jeans. "My nemesis," Simon said graciously, "is whoever asked me to follow that up." Simon then set up his own story. He described himself as a grudge-holder nonpareil, motivated only by an egotistical need to prove to people that they were wrong and he was right. "So naturally," he said, "the place I needed to be was in journalism." He was happy at the *Sun*, he told the full house, but then Marimow and Carroll came along.

Simon slammed their vision of journalism. He trashed the work they were most proud of, mocked their social graces, and dropped on them a generous payload of f-bombs. "Whenever they hear the word 'Pulitzer,' they become tumescent," he said. Naming a nasty fourth season *Wire* character "Marimow" wasn't enough, so Simon cast one-dimensional caricatures of Carroll and Marimow for the fifth season just to put a finger in their eyes.

The twist in the story, in Simon's telling, is that when he heard about Carroll's heroic stand at the *Los Angeles Times* and about Marimow's recent bout with prostate cancer, he felt bad. And then, when his actors started filling out the characters as real, complex human beings, he realized his own smallness and pettiness. Good storytelling dictated that the season would have to fully develop the characters and confront the bigger issues currently facing journalism, not just irritate his old "asshole bosses."

When I brought up this Creative Alliance tale with Simon, he distanced himself from it, taking pains to insist that *The Wire* is not a *roman à clef*. The Stoop story was full of hyperbole, he said; he had wanted to spin an outlandish story to help raise money for the nonprofit. "You caught me at a point

at which I was really trying to be entertaining, and I hope that story came across as genuinely self-effacing," he said. "It's not as personal as I made it."

After I interviewed Simon, I called John Carroll, hoping to get past any simplistic animosity and discover the more complex roots of their disagreement. Carroll was reluctant, but finally agreed to meet and requested that I send him stories Simon had used as examples of their differing journalistic approaches before we met. Marimow also agreed to talk as long as I read several *Sun* stories from the late 1990s.

Carroll has a face that belongs on a coin and a genteel, yet casual manner. I met him in late September at his Lexington, Kentucky, home. When I arrived, we chatted over coffee about a book he's writing and his joy at returning to reporting after decades of editing. Then we went out to the back patio, where we spent several hours talking in nearly perfect weather about his career and his approach to journalism. A couple hours in, Carroll said, "I got from the *Sun* that humorous broadcast about how bad Bill and I were." The Creative Alliance had been streaming an audio version of Simon's story online for months, but Carroll only discovered it in the twenty-four hours since I had flown out of Baltimore after an interview with the *Sun's* editors. In that small window of time, a flurry of activity had started. "I forwarded that to Marimow, by the way," Carroll said. After the audio started floating around the newspaper world, e-mails to Carroll followed. A *Los Angeles Times* colleague wrote, "I've heard through the grapevine that there is a possibility of your being subjected to unjust criticism." One of Marimow's editors at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* sent a passionate two-pager: "There are legions of journalists—legions—who will stand up, speak the truth, and take this guy on.... It's as Martin Luther King put it, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

I suggested to Carroll that perhaps some of the contentiousness surrounding Simon's departure could be explained by Alvarez's divorce analogy, and I said I was trying to find a legitimate, substantive difference underneath. But the way Carroll saw it, Simon's beef with his stewardship of the *Sun* was only one in a long trail of burned bridges. "Where has he ever worked that he didn't rage at?" Carroll said. "University of Maryland? I talked with the dean yesterday." While at *The Diamondback*, Simon had apparently talked trash about the school's president. And now, Simon is "not speaking to the *Sun*, or at least some of them. I've got something on that," Carroll said, handing me a faxed copy of an indignant, six-page letter Simon had written to the *Sun's* public editor in August that began, "ALL THAT FOLLOWS IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION."

Carroll seemed unfazed by Simon's zingers at him in the Stoop story, but the comments about Marimow went too far for him. "Simon has a credible point of view about American society," he said. "But he also, I think, has a need to hate. And I just think it's unfair to Bill Marimow, who deserves it less than anyone I can think of."

A few days later, I visited Marimow at the *Inquirer*, where he recently returned as the top editor. He hotly defended Carroll as a gentleman and a stellar journalist. "He owes

John an apology," Marimow said. "He really does." Marimow didn't find the Stoop story self-effacing. "At the end," Marimow said, "where he says, 'Well I really feel sorry for Bill because he had prostate cancer, and I don't want him to die'.... To me all that stuff is utter, unmitigated bullshit. It's cowardly, it's dishonorable, and it's nettlesome. I'd never say that about anybody."

I passed along Simon's assurance that he had exaggerated and that the show is fictional, and Marimow suggested I talk to Mike Leary, a new managing editor at the *Inquirer* who had just left the *Sun*. Leary, he said, was in the room with Simon when he had negotiated with the *Sun* for rights to the name and facilities. Leary told me that in those conversations, Simon disclosed that the upcoming season would indeed feature characters based on Carroll and Marimow. "

Many other former colleagues of Carroll and Marimow—including admirers of Simon's work—went on background to warn me of Simon's bitterness. One former *Sun* editor praised Marimow and Carroll and then warned me: "You don't want your name on a story you're going to regret five years from now."

In October, I met again with Simon at a coffee shop in Manhattan. Regarding the portrayal of former colleagues in *The Wire*, he said he is entitled to make fiction from his own memories. The show, he says, is allegorical, meant to address all American cities, not just Baltimore, and the journalism industry as a whole. And Simon claims the upcoming season will show a great affection for his craft and his alma mater. He cast about twenty *Sun* alums in small parts, and the first episode will simply be a validation of the craft: the city editor—the "conscience" of the newsroom for this season, says Simon—pounces on a good story and gets it in the paper. He said 70 percent of the underlying criticism will be about downsizing. It won't, he said, be "fighting some forlorn battle over shit that happened in the newsroom fifteen years ago."

Simon disparaged Carroll's and Marimow's "ad hominem" attacks on him in the press and pulled out a copy of *The New Yorker* that had come out the day before. There was an 11,000-word profile of Simon in the issue, and he flipped through to find two quotes. In the first, Marimow says Simon's "obsession" with Carroll's regime is "as monomaniacal as Captain Ahab." In the second, Carroll says Simon disdains anyone else who succeeds at police reporting. It was a psychological issue, Carroll said, and he pointed to the scoreboard: "Bill Marimow won two Pulitzers as a police reporter; David won zero." As Simon sees it, Carroll and Marimow refuse to debate him on the substance and resort to bunk psychoanalysis.

"The things they valued in journalism—management, not my colleagues—I do not value," Simon says. "The things I valued in journalism, they did not have regard for."

## Two Layers Down

For Simon, this dispute basically comes down to the complexity of urban problems. As he sees it, the "Philly model," imported to the *Sun* by Carroll and Marimow, ignored the decades of economic, racial, political, and social disconnects underlying that complexity. When it spurred reform, it was

reform that could not match the intransigence of the underlying patterns. The reporting itself was formidable, Simon says, but to him, homelessness, addiction, and violence aren't the central problems. "Those are all the symptoms of the problem," he says. "You can carve off a symptom and talk about how bad drugs are, and you can blame the police department for fucking up the drug war, but that's kind of like coming up to a house hit by a hurricane and making a lot of voluminous notes about the fact that some roof tiles are off."

As an example, he cited a 1994 *Sun* story about an alcoholic whose "enthralment with dope and booze...brought him Social Security disability checks for 'chronic alcoholism.'" The article noted that Social Security was doling out over \$1 billion a year to 200,000 addicts and alcoholics, and it was published during the push for reform that eventually spurred President Clinton to "end welfare as we know it" in 1996 with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Simon said the *Sun* story was simplistic; it had a villain, fraud, and the possibility of reform. "A lot of people were getting ssi [Supplemental Security Income] checks and maybe weren't truly disabled," he said. "That's a nice, tasty little thing you can bite off and win a prize with."

Social Security eventually proposed a \$300 million plan to purge the Supplemental Security Income rolls of those using their checks, as the *Sun* put it in a follow-up article, to "drink and drug themselves to death at taxpayers' expense." That article did note the irony that the plan's funding could have bought a year of residential treatment for 15,000 addicts. But Simon still felt it lacked enough context of mid-1990s welfare reform. He pointed out that as state social workers watched traditional welfare being pared down in those days, they began deliberately pushing welfare recipients onto the disability rolls out of concern for their...well, their welfare. Simon said that without an ssi check, many people would have been starving, disability or not. He wanted to see the *Sun* address the wider context of welfare reform, to capture how it was "landing in the street," to show who was falling between the cracks as the safety net was redesigned. The *Sun*, Simon believed, had written a simplistic story: "Nobody's minding the store at ssi."

"One story is small, self-contained, and has good guys and bad guys," Simon said. "The other one is about where we are and where we're going as an urban society and who's being left behind, and it's harder to report."

Part of the problem with stories like this, Simon says, is the *Sun* had killed off its poverty beat in the early 1990s. (Several former *Sun* reporters brought this up independent of Simon.) To write intelligently about the complexity of urban society, Simon said, reporters need to know not only their beat inside and out, but possess an awareness of social and economic trends "over years, if not decades." When new reporters take on a story like this, Simon said, they are not "constrained by history."

The crucible moment for Simon was a disagreement over "The Metal Men," a story that followed two addicts as they scavenged the city for piping, roofing—anything, really—to sell to scrap-metal yards that were all too willing to look the other way. It was exactly where Simon was going: tying an

intimate portrait of desperate people in a blighted neighborhood to the same economic system that propels the rest of us along so smoothly. Here's how the story ends:

Grant them, at least, some small due for creating wealth by destroying wealth, for going beyond the stereotype that says a dope fiend stands on a corner all day, scratching and nodding. Hard work doesn't scare a metal man.

"Sometimes," says Gary, "getting high is the toughest job there is."

Simon claims that Carroll spiked the story. Jan Winburn, an editor Carroll had recruited to improve the paper's narrative journalism, says she convinced Carroll to print the piece, and it ran on the front of the Sunday magazine. But Simon had reached a breaking point. Since returning from book leave, Simon had grown increasingly alienated. At the wine-and-dine "salons" management had convened to discuss how to "make the *Sun* great," Simon says he was appalled to hear reporters trashed by name. He had been rejected when he proposed a series on race. He also thought his book reporting made him more valuable to the paper, and that he deserved a higher raise than what Marimow was offering (he insists it was not about the money but recognition). There was a buyout on the table, and he had a standing offer for work on the television adaptation of *Homicide*. He took the buyout.

John Carroll remembers things differently, though not as clearly—he hasn't been thinking about David Simon as much as David Simon has been thinking about him. First, regarding the ssi story, Carroll says fraud is fraud. He didn't want to see every pathology in American society squeezed into one story, and he thinks a newspaper should write about fraud upon learning of it. "In my mind," he said, "if you want to have public support for government social programs, those programs have to do what they say they're for.... You'll end up with fewer social-service programs if you take the attitude that they're just there to be ripped off for a higher purpose."

"The Metal Men" was symptomatic to Carroll, too, but in a different way than for Simon. Carroll had found it to be too similar to the reporting Simon was doing for *The Corner* at a time when he felt too many *Sun* reporters were using the newspaper as a base for their book-writing careers. "When you're in a downsizing business," Carroll said, "you have to make some pretty tough decisions in favor of people there everyday knocking themselves out for the paper." (Simon vehemently protested this, saying he did original reporting with mostly newfound sources.) Carroll also doesn't remember spiking "The Metal Men." "If I did," he said, "maybe I provided the antidote by hiring Jan Winburn." Landing on the front of the Sunday magazine, he said, must have been a vote of confidence.

But Bill Marimow thought "The Metal Men" ennobled the thieves who were stripping the city of its infrastructure, regardless of whether the subjects recognized the truth of their lives on the page. And when I went to see him in his glass-walled office at the *Inquirer*, he gave me a stack of stories that demonstrated his passion for urban issues. All had resulted in reforms, he said, that bettered the lives of the very people David Simon reported on with such zeal: a

deeply reported chronicle of cops indiscriminately unleashing poorly trained K-9 dogs on unarmed blacks; an exposé of a judge moonlighting as a slumlord; coverage of fifty-two children dying "needlessly" because of the failure of Philadelphia's Department of Human Services.

Marimow felt he was covering not only the symptoms, but the roots of urban problems. A story about students assaulting teachers was followed by a story about the failure of a special-education program. That article suggested that the assaulted teachers had been at risk because many of the attackers had previously been mishandled by special-education programs and then sent into regular classrooms. "This has nothing to do with Pulitzer Prizes," Marimow said. "It has everything to do with: my wife's a teacher, I'm hypersensitive to this, and I wanted to transcend symptoms to causes and solutions."

Carroll felt he had addressed the complexity as well. A Pulitzer-winning *Los Angeles Times* story about problems at

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**'Let's pick one thing, and hammer the living hell out of it.'**

**—John Carroll**

a hospital serving a black neighborhood addressed the subtle racial dynamics that held the city's leadership back from demanding improvements. According to the article, the hospital was literally killing patients. But because it was staffed with many black doctors and had been the pride of black Los Angeles since just after the Watts riots, it could not be criticized; it had become a third rail to both white and black leaders. The *Los Angeles Times* stepped on that rail, and Carroll believes it saved lives. Carroll also handed me "Enrique's Journey," a gripping narrative of a Honduran boy who endured countless bitter hardships to rejoin his mother in America. Here, Carroll argued, was a disproportionate amount of a newspaper's resources spent to penetrate the story of an impoverished part of America that few of us understand.

You might argue—especially if you're David Simon—that there are broader economic and social forces at work in all these stories, that black hospitals in many cities will continue to have problems, that poor children will continue to die needlessly, that immigrant families will continue to be fractured. And this is where the difference emerges between Simon's broad sociological approach and the rifle-shot approach taken by Carroll and Marimow, and rewarded all over the country by the Pulitzer board: the latter approach demonstrably affects—possibly even saves—individual lives.

"I don't think a paper can necessarily take on all the complex issues that go into blighted neighborhoods and blighted lives," Carroll says. "To try to do every factor, you'll dissipate your energy and not really give attention to any one factor."



Carroll offered the school system as an example. There could be fifty topics worth writing about, he says, such as unions protecting bad teachers, wasteful bureaucracy at the board of education, and unsafe schools. "If you do all fifty," he says, "you won't do anything well enough to have an impact."

At the *Sun*, Carroll and Marimow took on education, asking themselves what the real vital sign of a school system is. When they read that children rarely catch up if they don't learn to read by third grade, they started a series called "Reading by 9." "We'll continue to try and cover everything," Carroll said. "But let's pick one thing and hammer the living hell out of it." The spotlight was unrelenting: the paper regularly posted reading scores for every school in the city, and there were dozens of articles over several years.

This isn't to say Carroll doesn't support Simon's vision of journalism. "I admire that kind of reporting," he says, "telling what's going on in these areas by going there and dealing with the full complexity of it.... But you've got to be really good at telling it." Without the talent, he argues, you can't tackle that kind of reporting, and that kind of talent "doesn't grow on trees."

"I know it's a monumental economic and moral issue," he says of the underclass and increasing inequality. "But what is the solution? I don't know. I myself would be very happy to pay more in taxes even though I pay a lot. To do my share to make it a country in which everyone has insurance, an opportunity for a job, everyone has the right to a living wage.... I agree with his cause, basically. I think he's a bit of a head case, but he's smart, creative, and on the subject of race and class in America, he's on the side of the angels."

But Carroll insists that it's worth it to push harder on more discrete issues. "I don't doubt that thousands of children learned to read because of that unwavering spotlight," Carroll says. "Did it solve the problem of inadequate schools, poverty, racism, or other issues that are so intractable in the city? No. But it did some good for some people."

### How Wide an Angle?

Simon does raise an interesting question about results-driven investigative journalism. It certainly improves the lives of some people, but reforms are often short-lived, the underlying patterns unyielding. Reform, in fact, is the theme of the third season of *The Wire*. In the main plotline, a renegade police major, tired of watching mass arrests make no perceptible impact on violent crime, secretly tries to legalize drugs in his district. He sets up three spots in the city where the police would not interfere with the sale or use of drugs, and violent crime goes down. Word of the plan leaks to reporters and politicians, who inevitably pounce on the controversy for their own good. When the police brass find out, the disgraced major goes out on a lieutenant's pension.

The on-screen epigraph from the first episode of the season, a line taken from a street-level drug dealer, says it all: "Don't matter how many times you get burnt, you just keep doin' the same." The episode opens with Baltimore's mayor standing with his hand on a pump that, when depressed, will trigger the demolition of a high-rise building that had been a violent, drug-infested housing project. He proudly

announces the construction of new low- and middle-income townhouses, then depresses the pump. The building comes down, and the dust escapes the established perimeter, slowly engulfing the surprised faces of all the politicians and glad-handers in attendance. The scene was unsubtle by Simon's standards, but it was his marquee message: obsess over the smaller problems, and the bigger problems will blow right back in your face.

Will the thousands of additional children who learned to read in Baltimore after the "Reading by 9" series thrive into adulthood? The spotlight was on the schools, but much of what determines success in learning to read is learned at home before kindergarten. Once children get to school, well over half of the variance in their achievement scores is attributable to factors outside the schools. Perhaps 15 or 20 percent is attributable to teachers. And overall early gains by disadvantaged children often disappear by high school. (Coincidentally, in *The Wire*'s final season, this very fact will hamper a mayor's effort to reform elementary schools.) Ought the spotlight shine on the extracurricular socioeconomic factors that interfere with learning?

A spotlight beamed higher and wider, however, may not effect any appreciable change. Is it a greater virtue to confront deeper truths about where our country is going and how successful we are at living up to the American ideal of equal opportunity than it is to improve individual lives? Should we keep doin' the same, no matter how many times we get burnt?

Lynda Robinson, Simon's colleague at the *Sun*, now an editor at *The Washington Post Magazine*, says that he was on the right track before he left nonfiction. The combination of systemic analysis and narrative, she says, is the highest form of journalism, and she cites reporters like Katherine Boo as examples of the "investigative-narrative" style. "You come out of it not just understanding why the system isn't working, but caring and understanding the lives of people affected by it," Robinson said. Jan Winburn, who is now delighted to have the title of narrative editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, also mentions Boo's work as a model. "Ironically," she says, "a criticism of narrative is that you paint a picture of what's happening, but don't get at the root cause or explore the policy that causes that problem. The great reporters are bringing those two things together."

Simon was careful not to hold up one or two examples as a model for his vision of journalism, saying more generally that he'd like to see "problems and people portrayed in all of their complexity and contrariness." He feels reporters who want to understand the context of urban stories should read books that capture the complexity of social forces, such as Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land* and William Julius Wilson's *When Work Disappears*. Wilson's tract, in fact, surveys the last forty years of media coverage of the underclass and convincingly laments its increasing focus on the "culture of poverty" at the expense of structural explanations.

At a 2006 Columbia Journalism School panel on "the crisis of boys," economist Marcellus Andrews painted a picture similar to Simon's: social forces that are too strong for individuals to push back against; a lack of skills and education



that renders the underclass “redundant” as laborers; the only available jobs offering wages too low to support a family; schools providing an education too shoddy to enable the type of collective social mobility that could raise up a community; an illegitimate economy as the only solution for the underclass and an all-out war in response. “The ‘surplus male’ crisis shows up in the form of violence in streets,” Andrews said, and journalism fails to “show folks how they are pushed by unintentional forces.” He advised journalists to “give a sense of the hardness of this thing, a sense of the blood on the floor... so that when someone finishes reading the story they... will not succumb to simple-minded answers.” (At one point, I read a quote from Andrews to Simon—“the end of the American segregation system a half century ago put black people onto the blue-collar road to the middle class just when the on-ramp shut down”—and Simon perked up. “That’s it,” he said.)

Steve Luxenberg, who left his spot as the editor of the *Washington Post*’s Outlook section in February 2006 to write a book, knows something about deep inner-city reporting: he hired David Simon in 1983, and he edited “Rosa Lee’s Story,” Leon Dash’s immersion-reporting classic in *The Washington Post* in 1994. Luxenberg’s three decades as an editor—especially the generation that has passed since Dash’s epic story on the intergenerational transmission of poverty—have not made him sanguine about that type of reporting getting any more column inches.

Luxenberg said that newsroom priorities go through cycles. For instance, after Watergate and CIA abuses came to light, he said, “we talked with too much chest pounding about the public’s ‘right to know.’ That’s not a phrase you hear a heck of lot in newsrooms these days. I’m not saying newsrooms are bankrupt morally, but poverty is just not a discussion they’re having right now. Now it’s self-preservation.”

## Triage

It is a bit of a false dichotomy to portray Simon’s vision of capturing complexity and Marimow’s and Carroll’s record of effecting change as competing philosophies. Ideally we would do both. But in an era of “self-preservation,” it’s getting harder to do either.

The real Baltimore *Sun*—on Calvert Street, not a soundstage—insists it is still trying to do both. In the downstairs lobby, pictures of H. L. Mencken and *Sun* founder A. S. Abell hang high on a wall with accompanying quotes. Abell chides visitors about partiality and the “common good,” while Mencken muses wistfully on what a lark reporting can be: “It is really the life of kings.” On a visit in September to see *Sun* editor Tim Franklin, his assistant, Rosie, found me in the lobby and cheerfully accompanied me up to the *Sun*’s buzzing newsroom. Franklin has an endearing midwestern affability and projects confidence straight across the room. He insisted his paper can do “quality” work with fewer resources.

“I want people to look at the *Sun* in ten years,” he said, “and say it did capture that snapshot of that time in the city’s history, that it chronicled lives in inner-city neighborhoods, and told stories through the eyes of people living it.” Franklin would consider the *Sun* a success if that happens. *Sun*

reporters such as Julie Bykowicz, Annie Linskey, Stephen Kiehl, and Gus Sentementes have done vivid street-level reporting. Fred Schulte and June Arney exposed a colonial-era ground rent law that was being used to take homes away from thousands of city homeowners. Eric Siegel captured the complexity of urban blight in a brilliant series called “A Neighborhood Abandoned.” An affecting narrative by reporter Liz Bowie and photojournalist Andre Chung followed two homeless teens through their entire senior year of high school and received a passionate reaction from all levels of Baltimore society. “Let me first start off by saying I don’t read the newspaper,” wrote a nineteen-year-old student to the *Sun* in an e-mail. “Reading this story... made me look at life different.”

But as dedicated as the *Sun*’s reporters are, walls are falling down around them. Since Tribune Company took over in 2000, the *Sun*’s newsroom staff has declined from approximately four hundred to three hundred. (The Poynter Institute estimates that 3,500 newsroom jobs have been cut across the country during that time.) The *Sun*’s local news-hole has shrunk.

In Simon’s eyes, “You do less with less and more with more,” he said. “That’s why they call it more.” When I brought up “A Neighborhood Abandoned,” Simon agreed that it was exemplary work, but then pointed out that writer Eric Siegel—a thirty-year *Sun* veteran and precisely the kind of reporter Simon believes newspapers need to hold on to—took the last buyout.

Simon is highly amused by an irony he perceives in the press’s reaction to corporations’ slashing of newsrooms: that newspaper editors are now making speeches about the same economic forces—the triumph of capital over labor—that the press has been ignoring in their own cities for years. “What they should have been covering is now biting them in the ass,” Simon said. “We’ll see it in season five: Guys, you’re a little late. It happened to you, and it happened to the entire working class.”

Simon, like Franklin, wants his portrayal of Baltimore to be judged against the future, but his idea of the future is darker. *The Wire*, he says, is about the decline of the American empire. It might have sprung from a journalistic impulse, but he says he has moved beyond simple reportage. “Consider it a big op-ed piece,” said Simon, “and consider it to be dissent. What I saw happen with the drug war, a series of political elections, and vague attempts at reform in Baltimore.... What I saw happen to the Port of Baltimore, and what I saw happen to the Baltimore *Sun*—I think it’s all of a piece.” Should his premonition of the American empire’s future—more gated communities and more of a police state—come to pass and were someone to say he didn’t know it was coming, Simon said, it will at least be possible to pull *The Wire* off the shelf and say, “Don’t say you didn’t know this was coming. Because they made a fucking TV show out of it.” **CJR**

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LAWRENCE LANAHAN, formerly an analyst with American Institutes for Research in Washington, D.C., lived in Baltimore for five years and now is a freelance journalist in Brooklyn. The fifth season of *The Wire* premieres January 6, 2008, on HBO.

# The Redemption of Chris Rose

*Like his city and his newspaper, a survivor*

BY BARRY YEOMAN

On a breezy Sunday morning in October 2006, residents of New Orleans—displaced, exhausted, wondering if they would live to see their city's resurrection—woke to one of the most audacious acts of mass psychotherapy ever performed by an American newspaper. It took place under an unlikely byline. Chris Rose, a columnist for the daily *Times-Picayune*, was once known primarily for reporting on the bad behavior of visiting celebrities.

Hurricane Katrina changed that: it transformed Rose into a plaintive voice for a struggling city. His columns detailed the emotional toll of living amid still-flattened houses and daily reminders of the 1,500 who died in the storm's aftermath. And then, more than a year after the breached levees plunged whole districts underwater, Rose was sharing with readers the story of his own descent. Rose's column was promoted on page one and dominated the paper's Living section:

I should make a confession. For all of my adult life, when I gave it thought—which wasn't very often—I regarded the concepts of depression and anxiety as pretty much a load of hokey. I thought anti-depressants were for desperate housewives and fragile poets. I no longer feel that way. Not since I fell down the rabbit hole myself and enough hands reached down to pull me out. One of those hands belonged to a psychiatrist holding a prescription for anti-depressants. I took it. And it changed my life. Maybe saved my life.

For the next 4,000 words, Rose described a spiral familiar to many Katrina survivors: the “crying jags and fetal positionings,” the “thousand-yard stare,” the inability to hold conversations. “I’d noodle around on the piano, read weightless fiction, and reach for my kids, always, trying to hold them, touch them, kiss them. Tell them I was still here,” he wrote. “But I was disappearing fast.” Finally, Rose described how the antidepressant drug Cymbalta helped clear away some of that darkness, enabling him to function again.

In few cities would such a personal account have received such prominent play—or elicited more than 6,000 e-mails. But Katrina has transformed how journalism is practiced at *The Times-Picayune*. It has blurred the lines between those who suffer and those who chronicle that suffering, and has challenged traditional notions of objectivity. And it has become a better newspaper in the process. Every reporter and editor was directly affected by Katrina, and the *Picayune's* pages are suffused every day with outrage and betrayal—and with solid reporting. The paper has relentlessly investigated the Army Corps of Engineers, which built New Orleans's faulty levees, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, whose response to the storm provoked such frustration and anger. It has sounded the alarm about Louisiana's disappearing wetlands, which could render New Orleans even more vulnerable during the next hurricane. And it has sent reporters to Japan and the Netherlands to learn what makes

successful flood-control systems work.

And the newspaper has bonded with its readers; the *Picayune* is an essential part of coffee-shop conversation all over the metropolitan area. At a time when dailies are wondering how to hold onto wandering readers, it has proven that a paper that claims a stake in its city's survival, reporting with passion and voice, can remain an essential part of the civic conversation. “Other papers would kill to be that relevant,” says Harry Shearer, the actor and satirist and part-time New Orleanian.

No *Picayune* writer epitomizes this transformation more than the forty-seven-year-old Rose, whose journey through breakdown and redemption spurred a communal catharsis. “He bled for us in those columns,” says Linda Ellerbee, the former NBC anchor who covered Katrina's aftermath for Nick News, a children's broadcast. “He made it more real than any photo, any TV coverage could—more than Anderson Cooper



crying on the air, more than Sean Penn going through the water in his boat. He let us into his dark places. In the old-fashioned, Biblical sense, he bore witness."

BEARING WITNESS HADN'T been in Rose's plans. After covering crime, presidential politics, and regional features at the *Picayune* for fourteen years, he was tapped in 1998 to replace a retiring gossip columnist. He set out, he says, to "dirty that column up" and engage younger readers. "I was over reading about where rich white folks went on their vacations: 'Bill and Buffy Moriarty recently back from Aspen, where they report that little Molly is doing very well in film school.' I'm going, 'Whoa! Guys! We're almost at the end of the century here. They should send that out in their Christmas newsletter. That doesn't belong in the newspaper.'"

Reinventing the column, Rose took readers to an oxygen bar in the suburbs and a male-stripper revue downtown. He took aim at stars making the New Orleans scene, including Lindsay Lohan ("America's most famous underage drinker") and Sean Penn ("Note to Sean, at the request of local service industry employees: 'Last call' means LEAVE.") He made a sport of sassing Britney Spears, who grew up in Louisiana's Tangipahoa Parish. After the pop singer's fifty-five-hour Las Vegas marriage, Rose predicted she would "someday be remembered as the woman who put the 'ho' in Tangipahoa." He loved pulling stunts, then writing about them. In "Straight Eye for the Queer Guy," he assembled a group of Bud-swilling friends to give a reverse makeover to a gay bartender. He mocked the French Quarter's tarot readers by donning a chicken-foot necklace and telling two-dollar fortunes with a Magic 8 Ball.

It was hardly immortal journalism. Still, the column was well written and filled with affection for Rose's adopted hometown (he is a native of Maryland). "What can I say? It's superficial stuff," he says. "It's pretty meaningless but I enjoyed it." A devotee of (and former stringer for) *People* and *Us Weekly*, "I was a guy who could make a living off his hobby."

For Rose's last column of August 2005, he recounted how New Orleans's growing film industry was luring his neighbors to audition as extras. Then, with Katrina bearing down, he and his family fled, taking a circuitous route that landed his wife and children in Maryland. Rose himself returned to New Orleans. His house was undamaged, but the city was in ruins, emptied of its inhabitants. With most of the newspaper's staff in Baton Rouge, Rose and a handful of colleagues huddled in a makeshift newsroom with a windup radio, a generator, a shotgun, and two .357 revolvers. (See "Uncharted Waters," by Douglas McCollam, November/December 2005.) There, they produced fierce prose that won the newspaper's staff two Pulitzer Prizes.

Rose's writing was as urgent as anyone's. "I saw a dead guy on the front porch of a shotgun double on a working-class street and the only sound was wind chimes," he wrote in his September 7 column, the first after his return. From then on, three times a week, he brought readers into a world

where intimacy and darkness often commingled. He wrote about the friends and strangers who gathered on his stoop every night, including a couple who returned home only to make a drunken suicide pact a few weeks later—they couldn't stand living in "the smoking ruins of Pompeii." The man killed himself; the woman didn't. Rose wondered aloud, "Where are we now in our descent through Dante's nine circles of hell?"

MEANWHILE, ROSE PLAYED DOWN his own hell, though he also sometimes lived it in public. When he blacked out one afternoon, falling face down into the grass and not moving for hours, he wrote about it, noting that even before Katrina, "a man passed out on the side of the road in New Orleans was not a uniquely alarming sight." For the columnist's family, though, those first months after the hurricane were profoundly alarming. Rose, who had quit drinking a year and a half before the storm, had resumed. "There was a lot of booze and a lot of drugs around, and we were all just narcotizing ourselves," he recalls. His wife and parents urged him to get help. He didn't listen. Things got worse.

After his neighbor's suicide, "it got really cold and that kind of snapped it right there," Rose recalls. "Nobody wanted to sit outside. And I withdrew inside." For a five-week period he didn't go to Maryland to see his wife and children, "and I didn't talk to my family hardly at all. I hardly talked to anyone. I remember a friend during that period saying, 'Dude, they call you the voice of the city, but you never leave your house. Does anybody know that?'"

By November he knew something was seriously wrong. "I was pacing," he says. "I had the shakes. I did an interview with the *L.A. Times* and I had to call the guy back and I didn't even remember what I had said to him. Not because I was drunk but because I was manic. Even when it warmed up again, I didn't turn on the light and open the door. Sometimes I could hear people knock. I wouldn't answer. I was scared and I was rapidly becoming very, very depressed." Adding to his troubles was the fact that thousands of *Picayune* readers were sending Rose their own tales of anguish. "When he became the sounding board for everyone's pain, that's when it became too much to ask of him," says James O'Byrne, features editor for the *Picayune*.

Rose was not the only *Picayune* reporter suffering. Whenever his colleagues left New Orleans and visited the paper's temporary headquarters in Baton Rouge, "they would be haunted," O'Byrne says. "They would look like people who had been at war. You had to tend to them. You had to get them food and hug them and get them a shower. It was a real trauma-decompression moment for them." Yet the staff was producing phenomenal work. In the months following Katrina, *Picayune* reporters debunked many of the rumors of Superdome violence; wrote lyric accounts of human suffering; and did the investigative legwork that pinned New Orleans's flooding on engineering failures rather than nature. Rose provided the emotional barometer. "His columns were ruthlessly observed, yet filled with a dark but real compassion," says actor Shearer. "He would start out outraging or



amusing you, but by the end, you would start to puddle up, because he hit an emotional nerve."

As Rose's writing grew more transparent, "I was getting a daily regimen of e-mails from people who were reading my stories and asking me, 'Are you okay?'" the columnist says. "Strangers would stop me on the street and say, 'I know your family's gone. Would you like a warm meal?' One thing I was not aware of was that I was cracking up in public—that I was writing a real-time diary of a descent into madness."

Initially, newsroom leaders didn't know how to respond. *Picayune* editor Jim Amoss, a New Orleans native who's generally credited with ramping up the paper's quality over the past seventeen years, knew about the e-mails from concerned readers. "As an editor, you're struggling with that worry," he says, "and at the same time knowing that his anguish is the source of his best work."

In 2006, Rose's writing took a turn. "His work got really angry for a while," says O'Byrne, who edits Rose's column. "As he stopped writing about his travels around the city, and started writing more about how pissed off he was, I began to get concerned about him. I really urged him to see a doctor about his depression."

ROSE'S BREAKTHROUGH COLUMN in the fall of that year, describing his depression and the lucidity that antidepressants brought, was titled "Hell and Back," and it ended with an altar call. For those who recognized themselves in him, Rose wrote, "Let me offer some unsolicited advice, something that you've already been told a thousand times by people who love you, something you really ought to consider listening to this time: Get help."

And they did. Rose's column "sent hundreds and hundreds of people to their physicians," says O'Byrne. "I know that just based on the physicians that I have, who themselves got fifteen or twenty patients to come to them and say, 'I read Chris Rose's column. I think this may be me.'"

The next week, Rose urged readers to look for the "red flags" of mental illness in their neighbors. "I don't mean to get all Oprah on you here," he wrote, "but if you see the opportunity, help a guy get his shoes on, because sometimes it's harder than you know." In fact, for Rose, recovery was proving harder than just taking a pill. Feeling impatient, he started upping his dose of Cymbalta. Then he added painkillers to the mix. He began withdrawing again, and losing weight, until he weighed what he did in eighth grade. His columns became "unrunnable," says O'Byrne, who spiked three in a short span of time. "They were just angry, rageful rants against life and the universe."

Finally, last April, Rose's wife Kelly arranged for an intervention. She and O'Byrne, along with three neighbors, confronted the columnist at his house and urged him to enter rehab. He didn't need much persuasion. Not only did Rose understand he was in trouble, but he had an additional incentive: he had also recently learned that he was a bone-marrow match for his sister, who had leukemia. "I thought, 'I'm gonna save Ellen's life and then write a story that will blow people away,'" Rose says. "And I get to be the hero." Rose went into

rehab for thirty days, kicking both the painkillers and the antidepressants. But not in time to donate marrow to his sister, who died three months later.

THERE IS NO thousand-yard stare on Rose's face now. He is as transparent in person as his columns are. One afternoon last October, he brought forty copies of *I Dead in Attic*, the best-selling compilation of his post-Katrina columns, to a meeting of the Ladies Leukemia League in suburban Kenner. After a spirited talk—Rose repeatedly mocked the country-club neighborhood where they were meeting—his friend Jacquee Carvin raised her hand. "Is there anything else that you can personally impart to the leukemia society?" she asked. Rose let out a sigh. "You put me on the spot there," he said.

"Just watch me and you'll get through it," Carvin replied.

Rose's eyes welled up. "My sister died of leukemia in August," he said, his voice choking. "I was her bone-marrow match, but we never made it." He told the women about his struggle with depression and slide into drug addiction. "I was killing myself real fast. When I found out I was a bone-marrow donor, I said, 'I've got to fix myself.' And I went to rehab. So what happened was, instead of saving my sister's life, she saved mine."

These days, Rose laughs hard and cries easily. His marriage has dissolved, but he is hanging on. "I'm a work-in-progress," he says, sitting on his new front porch near Tulane University and watching his children race in and out of the house. "I got these little guys; I gotta take care of them." And Rose is trying to figure out the next step for his journalism. He's writing fewer internal monologues and more reported stories. He feels settled into New Orleans for the long haul.

Part of the reason is *The Times-Picayune* itself. Since Katrina, the newspaper has found its purpose: as a super-charged advocate for the city's survival. It doesn't debate whether New Orleans should be rebuilt; it blasts any public official or government agency standing in the way. By writing as outraged fellow sufferers, Rose thinks the *Picayune* is creating a new journalistic model, one that other dailies would be wise to follow. "It'd be interesting if every newspaper treated its community as if it were at risk," he says. "And if you took a good look at most major cities, they are. Not at risk of dying and being wiped off the map. But look at the state of the American city and it's in trouble."

"I got into newspaper work because I thought it was a vital and romantic part of the American fabric," Rose continues. "I watched those old movies with Gary Cooper about what a newspaper meant. And in truth, for most of my career, that's not been the way it really played out."

"I got India ink in my blood," he says, meaning he always felt compelled to write, even when there was no higher purpose. But now there is. "For the last two years, it's like—Wow! This is what I always thought it's supposed to be like," Rose says. "You wake up in the morning and you kick some ass." **CJR**

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# The Language of Strangers

*How a hotshot editor with big ideas failed to comprehend the soul of community journalism*

BY JONATHAN ROWE

Not long ago, a large sign appeared in a pasture by a road not far from where I'm writing this. "Coming soon to this site," it blared. You saw it and you thought: *Oh, please. Not here.* As you got closer, though, the smaller print became visible, and the thought was completed: "Absolutely nothing," it said. This was thanks to a local group that had bought the land in order to prevent exactly what the sign first suggested. Out here in West Marin

County, California, we live in a quiet, constant state of siege. The rolling ranchlands and ocean beaches are iconic. Point Reyes National Seashore, which occupies much of the coastland, draws more than two million visitors a year. You scan the unspoiled hills and it is not hard to imagine encampments of developers, waiting like guerrillas for their moment to descend.

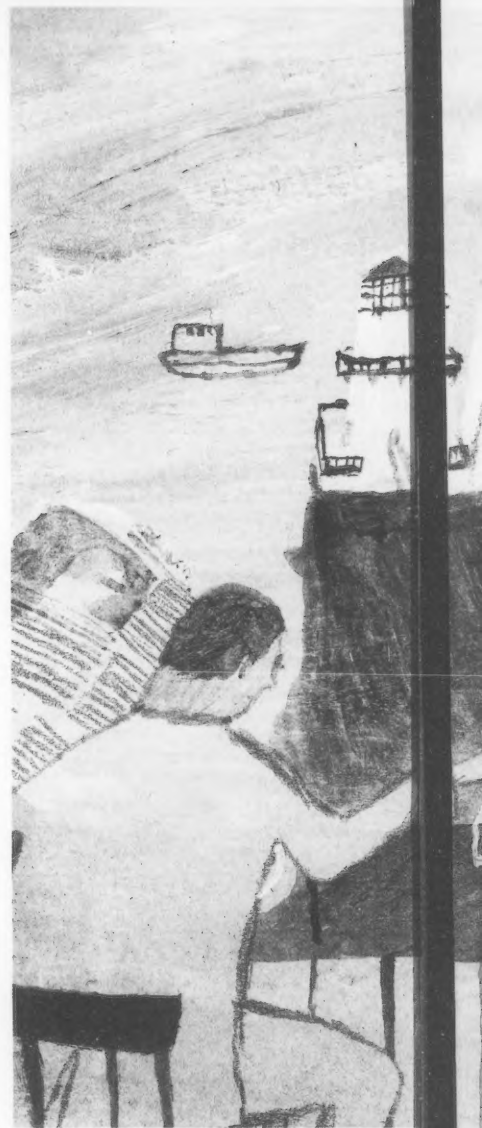
Actually, much of the land is protected, which makes the remaining pockets and edges all the more contested. The social ecology is something else. A berserk real-estate market and Silicon Valley money have been changing the towns that occupy this special landscape. They are precariously unspoiled. Most of the people who live here couldn't afford to if they had to buy in now. The protected seashore is expanding literally to the edge of Point Reyes Station, which is the closest thing to a hub. More tourists are coming, traffic is increasing, and second and third homes are proliferating.

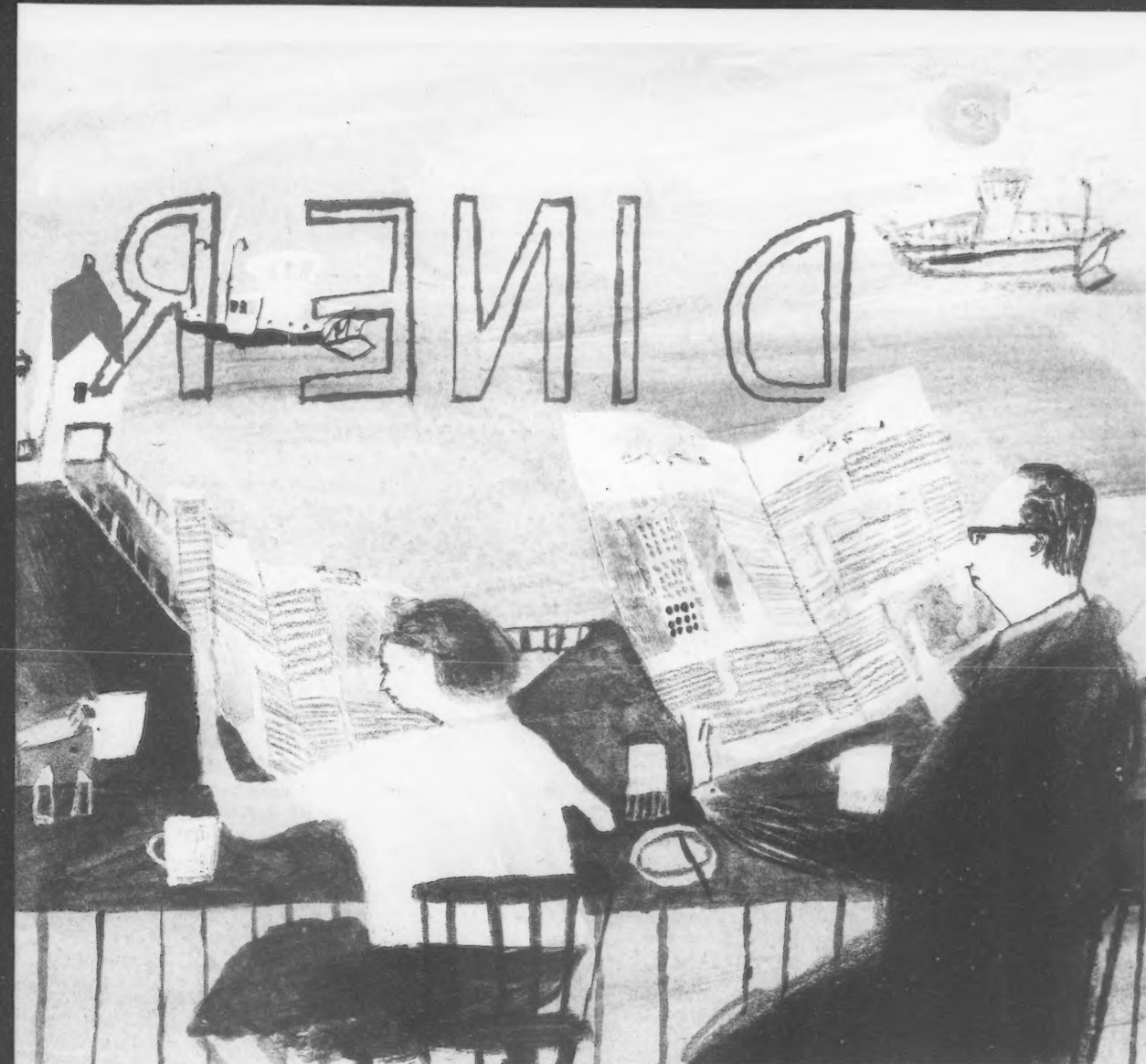
Carmel-ization is a pervasive dread. The resulting tensions are ripe journalistic fodder, but instead of just covering them, the local paper itself has become a focal point.

The *Point Reyes Light* is almost as iconic as the landscape it inhabits. In 1979, the *Light* became the little paper that could, when it won a Pulitzer for its investigations of the cult-like Synanon, a local drug rehab center whose officials once left a rattlesnake in the mailbox of a critic. But the prize meant less to local readers than did weekly news about the National Seashore's expansion plans, run-off into Tomales Bay, and reckless motorcycle riders who accelerate into blind curves and fly off coastal Highway One (not that anyone's grief would be less than total about that). It was our forum.

But a couple of years ago, the *Light* changed hands, and the new owner soon became an embodiment of the worst fears for the area the newspaper used to symbolize.

Now West Marin has a second weekly, the *West Marin*





*Citizen*, which has made a strong start with the *Light*'s disaffected readers. "Newspaper war" may be too strong a term; the competition is low-key, as is most of life out here. Like former spouses at a social gathering, the two weeklies barely acknowledge one another's presence. But the advertiser and subscriber bases are limited (total population is about 15,000) and few people expect that two papers can survive for long.

In part, this is a story about personality, and how it filters through a paper and shapes the response of readers, especially in a small town. But at a more basic level it is about what readers want and what newspapers ultimately are for. It is about journalism as a service to a community versus journalism as a vehicle for the ambitions of writers and editors.

THERE MUST BE a Nexis file somewhere with the term "nude beaches" highlighted in yellow, which every reporter consults before coming to West Marin. For what it's worth,

I've been here seven years and nude beaches haven't crossed my radar once (surfers are another matter). As for "aging hippies," the other obligatory trope—well, that's a bit like describing New York City as a place where everyone goes clubbing until 4 a.m.

The truth is a lot more interesting. Point Reyes Station is a little under forty miles northwest of San Francisco, though because of the landscape and the narrow, winding roads, it is psychologically at least three times that far away. The "aging hippies" actually were industrious, back-to-the-land types who joined the old ranching families, artists, academics, and tree cutters and trades people out here. New money has arrived more recently, as have Hispanics, who make up half the elementary school.

It is not always an easy mix. Ranchers and environmentalists butt heads over coyotes, bovine run-off, and maximum house size, to name just a few items on a long list. But the



basic ambience has been one of live and let live, which, happily, there's been enough space to accommodate. Politically the land ethic is a given, as are habitat concerns generally. But debates over the place of humans and their creations in the natural scheme—an ecologically based oyster farm in the National Seashore, for example, or a footbridge over a creek—can take on a theological intensity. Another ingredient in the mix is a western libertarian streak. The area is unincorporated, which means there's no local government. An inventive civic culture has filled the void.

The absence of local government has meant something else, too—a lack of a civic forum. That's the role the *Light* has filled. Under Dave Mitchell, who owned the paper from 1975 (with a brief hiatus) until 2005, the *Light* became a local institution, not always loved but almost always read. The *Light* was where people found out about garage sales and events at the Dance Palace community center (which was designed and built largely by volunteers). The weekly feature, "Sheriff's Calls," was a laconic window into daily life, listing everything from cows in the road to restraining orders against ex-spouses. The photographs by Art Rogers, which follow families through the years, provided a gentle, poignant sense of time and change.

If the town had a visual icon, it was the lighthouse on the masthead, which was a reference to the Point Reyes lighthouse, from which the paper takes its name. And the soul of the paper—and some would say the town—were the letters. People out here are well-read and not lacking in opinions, and Mitchell printed almost all of their missives, though not always right away. Sometimes they ran on for pages.

Mitchell himself is a gangly man with a bit of a stoop and a long, brooding face. He was not a saint by any means. He rode his hobbyhorses and had a thumb on the reportorial scale, as most editors of small publications do. He was moody and not always nice, but nobody ever questioned his commitment to this place. In recent years, however, he seemed more stooped than usual, and withdrawn. It was well known, too, that the *Light* had been skirting financial trouble. Dave had gone through a \$200,000 inheritance to keep it afloat. He said the paper was back in the black, but no one knew how long that could last. It wasn't quite a deathwatch, but people were wondering if one might be coming.

ROBERT PLOTKIN APPEARED out of nowhere. What we knew was from the papers: he was a former assistant district attorney in Monterey County who had gone to Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and then moved to Bolinas, a town about twelve miles south of Point Reyes Station. Now he was buying the *Light* for half a million dollars.

It wasn't much to go on. And yes, people would have been more comfortable with someone local. But then again, maybe not. And if half a million seemed a lot: it meant that he had money to spend, which meant that the *Light* would stay on. I think it's fair to say that the game was Plotkin's to lose—and he seemed determined to do that almost from the start.

First, there was the braggadocio and self-dramatization. Most people in his situation would lay low for a bit, speak

with everyone and get a feel for the place. Instead, Plotkin came out talking. We read that he was going to be the "Che Guevara of literary revolutionary journalism." The *Light* would become the "*New Yorker* of the West." Not only that: he also was going to bestow upon us the "best and brightest" of young journalism grads. Plotkin used the Kennedy-era phrase without irony, or apparent awareness of the need for it. We were expected to be impressed. It all seemed a bit of a toot for an unproven horn.

I tried to envision a typical *Light* story about, say, septic issues, written as literary journalism at the ramparts. Well, maybe he would surprise us. To find out more, I invited Plotkin to join me on my weekly radio program on KWMR-FM, which is the community station here. (It was the first of three such interviews.)

Physically Plotkin is on the short side, with some resemblance to Jerry Seinfeld, including an unfortunate tendency toward snarkiness. There is a boyish quality and sweetness, too; he clearly wants to be liked. But the other side keeps getting the upper hand. On the show, he was smart on journalism generally, but less so on journalism in this small town.

I asked about the literary journalism, how it relates to the usual weekly fare of the *Point Reyes Light*—a meeting of the county board of supervisors, for example? Well, he said, Joan Didion wrote about county supervisor meetings. Look at her.

Joan Didion? She of the clinical dispassion and acidic eye? Didion was writing *about* locals, but not *for* them. She was trotting them out for the amusement of readers in Los Angeles and New York. That Plotkin hadn't thought about the difference struck me as a little ominous.

UNDER THEIR SALES AGREEMENT, Mitchell agreed to stay and tutor Plotkin, and also continue his weekly column. In return he'd get a small salary and medical insurance. The arrangement fell apart quickly, to no one's great surprise. Things became messy. Plotkin accused Mitchell of attempting to assault him. Lawsuits followed.

The upshot for the paper was that Mitchell's old staff pretty much ran things at the start. Plotkin contributed headlines, editorials, and story ideas while he tried to learn the ropes. He soon showed a gift for the irritating gesture and off-key note. At first it was relatively minor things, such as the picture caption that called a French cheesemaker a "surrender monkey," and gratuitously provocative headlines such as FCC INDEMNITY FINES FOR KWMR GO UP 1000%. In fact, the station had been subject to no such fines. The FCC in Washington had raised fines generally. (As a station host, I did not appreciate the implication.) There were more serious stinkers, too, such as a front-page treatment, during Christmas week, of a brutal rape. Such occurrences became a steady drip-drip-drip, along with a self-congratulation that bordered on self-parody. We got features on the big-deal consultants Plotkin was bringing in, along with encomiums to his own stewardship. THE NEW LIGHT: ONE YEAR RETROSPECTIVE was the cover headline on the November 9, 2006, issue, under which were shots of each cover under Plotkin's reign.



When I went back through these issues, I was surprised at how little the paper actually had changed. But it doesn't take many drips to sour the whole can. And, as Plotkin asserted more control, the offenses deepened. A turning point came when he ran a piece on a Buy Local campaign, complete with a cartoon that portrayed local merchants as gouging customers. This one struck a nerve, but probably not the one that Plotkin had intended. Here, as elsewhere, main-street merchants struggle in a world of Kmart and Costcos. Some give generously to local causes, and their prices are reasonable for the most part; the local pharmacy is a near-legend in this regard. And anyway, the Buy Local campaign was about keeping money in the community and keeping main street vital, not about discounts.

The merchants were incensed. They dumped their stacks of papers at the *Light's* office and told Plotkin in effect to sell them himself. He dropped the subject, but bad feelings lingered.

IT IS A SIGN of the bond that existed between paper and town that a year ago in December, a local woman decided to organize a meeting at the Dance Palace to try to repair the breach, and about fifty people turned out on a winter evening—Plotkin included, which gave it the feeling of an intervention. I was out of town, but the organizer made a transcript, and it would make useful reading for journalists trying to understand what readers are looking for in local papers. (An edited version is available at [cjr.org](http://cjr.org).)

People spoke with eloquence and palpable hurt. "When people used to complain to me about Dave Mitchell," one person said, "I'd say, 'The *Point Reyes Light* is what holds this community together. It is the center. It is the glue.' ... I don't find that to be the case any more. It breaks my heart." The letters were a particular sore point. Plotkin wasn't running all of them, the way Mitchell did. He wasn't even getting back to people.

But beyond such particular complaints was a sense the paper wasn't written for them any more. The real audience seemed to be somewhere else. Plotkin's business model, if that's the term, was based on free labor in the form of J-school interns. The come-on was not subtle. His announcement at the Berkeley J-school declared that he was coming in search of the "next Orwell, Kapuscinski, or Didion."

The notice continued, in part,

I am in the process of selecting the Magnificent Seven; five literary journalists and two Magnum-quality photojournalists that will be the revolutionary vanguard of editorial quality. Every scene piece will be of Talk Of The Town quality. Every story dense with information will be written with the sophistication and wit of the *Economist*. Every photograph will capture what Henri Cartier-Bresson called, "The decisive moment." We will serve as a model of what a newspaper can be, so that others may learn from our example.

What can you say? Leave aside whether Plotkin himself had the editorial chops. Leave aside, too, the question that Berkeley students bristled at—namely, How could they repay their student debts as unpaid labor? (Mitchell had paid

## Plotkin 'encourages a Man from Mars voice, like Truman Capote showing up in a small town.'

his interns.) From a local standpoint, Plotkin was assuring a steady flow of reporters who had no connection to the place, and whose aim was to audition for jobs elsewhere. "He encourages a Man from Mars voice," a former intern told me, "like Truman Capote showing up in a small town."

Readers picked this up as a distanced quality—a stage whisper to prospective employers in big cities far away—and sometimes as a slightly mocking tone. "They know how to write," one person at the meeting said of the interns. "But they don't know how to write for the community."

Plotkin was by turns conciliatory and defensive. He had brought us "seven graduates from the best journalism schools in the country," he protested. Why couldn't we appreciate that? He wasn't printing more letters because he wasn't getting more, he said. "That's what is disquieting to me," another person replied. "People... are just fading away."

THAT COMMENT MADE me recall something I was told by a top staff member to a recently defeated member of Congress. They had known they were in trouble, he said, when they stopped receiving angry letters. If such a moment came for the *Light*—a moment at which people started to drop out emotionally and look for other options—it probably was the story on immigrants from Mexico out here in West Marin.

It was a journalistic staple, the local angle on the immigration raids that were a big national story at the time. But the jump page had something most readers did not expect. There, in black and white, was a picture of a local woman who was identified as undocumented. Another picture showed a seventeen-year-old Hispanic boy, a familiar presence around town, who was cited in the text as having undocumented people in his household.

I was stunned. There had been well-publicized raids about twenty miles away in San Rafael. To out these neighbors—I play basketball with the teenager on weekends—was embarrassing and unbelievable. Others felt the same way. Hispanic leaders wrote an angry letter to Plotkin and met with him. His public response was to reprint an article from the *American Journalism Review* that was ambivalent on the point.

Nothing else came of it. But as one of the leaders of the community uprising told me, "The trust was gone." On my show a while later, I asked Plotkin about the episode. I wanted to see if he had learned anything, but he was unrepentant. It would be "condescending" not to print this information after the people themselves provided it, he said. (The teenager told

me that he didn't understand the reporter's intention.)

Most people here—Mitchell included—don't dislike Plotkin personally. But he's a tough case, and maturity is not a strong suit. Jim Kravets, the managing editor Plotkin inherited from Mitchell, went with him to an annual festival in town and pointed out some people he should meet. His response, in effect: if anyone wanted to talk with the editor of the *Light*, they could approach him.

Kravets later left the *Light* and now edits the new paper, where several other former *Light* staffers have joined him. He says that by the time Plotkin realized he had to reach out, it was too late. So he retreated into a kind of defiance. "His own instincts were betraying him," Kravets says.

The tone-deafness continued in the matter of design. When Plotkin bought the paper, Mitchell still was laying it out with a waxer and paste-up boards. An upgrade was in order. But was it really necessary to hire a top-drawer design firm from Florida that had *The Wall Street Journal* on its client list, and then run a piece—SUPERSTAR DESIGNERS PUT FINAL TOUCHES ON NEW LIGHT—celebrating it? Or to run a "Pre-Plotkin" and "Post-Plotkin" spread comparing Mitchell's *Light* to his own? The design itself came out clean, corporate, and generic. One merchant told me customers thought it was a real-estate handout and picked it up without paying. The quirky, homegrown quality was gone. The clean design would resist the flotsam and jetsam—the meetings, talks, awards, what-not—that are so important in a small-town weekly.

Not only that, the lighthouse had disappeared from the masthead. The paper no longer looked the way residents see the town. It was almost as though Plotkin had kenned their worst fears and made the paper a visual embodiment of them.

THAT GUY YOU SEE downtown on Thursday afternoons, pencil behind his ear and order pad in hand, delivering stacks of papers from the back of his car? That's Joel Hack, and he looks a little like a Joel Hack—short, scruffy, not much troubled by sartorial concerns. He has a gruff good humor, but also conveys the impression that it would be better not to mess with him. Plotkin did.

For eleven years, Hack has put out a small paper called the *Bodega Bay Navigator* about thirty miles up the coast in Sonoma County. He took the paper online for financial reasons, and Plotkin made a play for the territory. Then, after Plotkin and Mitchell split, the latter began to write for the *Navigator* online. Plotkin sued for violation of a noncompete clause, and he included Hack in the lawsuit.

That did not go over well. With help from Plotkin's former printer (there's not space for every subplot, but you get the drift), Hack started the *West Marin Citizen*, which is the *Light*'s journalistic opposite—heavy on straight news and local opinion, and choc-a-bloc with meeting reports and other miscellany. The *Citizen* launched with the kind of community meeting people thought Plotkin would hold. As for design, Hack admits his instincts lean toward Dr. Bronner soap labels because he hates to "leave stuff out." Hack dislikes what he calls "corporate flashy bullshit."

Hack and Plotkin share a combative streak but not much else. The former learned journalism in high school as a photographer at a suburban Chicago weekly, where the editor told him to get as many faces into the paper as possible, and to "get all the names." The *Citizen* has lots of both. Hack handles the nuts and bolts while Kravets does the words. He seems to have little ambition beyond that. "The thrill is in delivering information," Hack says. "That's all the reward you need."

I asked Plotkin, in one of our on-air interviews, how he saw the difference between the two papers. He cited a recent *Citizen* story on a local tax issue. "We'd give that a few sentences in a box," he said. More than one listener said to me afterward, "That's the story I really want to read."

Actually, the *Citizen* could use a bit of feature sensibility. Perhaps that will come. Meanwhile, the energy in town seems to be shifting its way. In Point Reyes Station, merchants say the *Citizen* is outselling the *Light*, sometimes by two to one. The competition appears to have been good for the *Light*, by the way. The features still read like student pieces and the voice still is not quite there. But the paper is more news-based and the sophomoric lapses have been less frequent. There are more letters, too.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Plotkin has hired a managing editor and pulled back from daily operations. His focus now is the *Coastal Traveler*, a kind of tourist guide that for years has helped support the *Light*. Under Mitchell, it was a newsprint giveaway. Plotkin has made it a glossy lifestyle mag with Rolex and Ducati ads, and features touting BMW dirt bikes and Zero Halliburton luggage. He is selling it for \$4.95.

The new *Coastal Traveler* presents West Marin—actually, the whole coast down to Big Sur and Monterey—as locations to be consumed rather than as places in which to live. It provides a venue for breathy clichés about us locals (our towns are "Stalingrads of anti-corporate resistance," for example) and for Plotkin's paeans to his motorcycle ("I loved it like a boy loves a hottie working for Médecins sans Frontières"). Out here, praising motorcycles is a little like praising car alarms on New York's Upper West Side. I can't help thinking that's part of the attraction for him.

There could be a niche for such a high-end magazine here. We do get plenty of visitors with money. And actually, there never was anything wrong with Plotkin's vision of journalism in the abstract. It was just the setting on which he decided to impose it. Local weeklies are rare bright spots in a journalistic picture gone pretty grim. Even in an Internet age—perhaps because it is an Internet age—such papers seem to be connecting in ways larger media don't. Just possibly, what people are hungry for in journalism is what they seek in their physical environment as well—a sense of familiarity and, most of all, place.

If people want *The New Yorker*, they get *The New Yorker*, and many out here do. But that kind of writing is the language of strangers. From a local paper, they want something else, something more neighborly. Out here at least. **CJR**

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JONATHAN ROWE is a contributing editor to the *Washington Monthly* and *YES!* Magazine. He lives in Point Reyes Station and has written for both the *Citizen* and the *Light*.

# What Would You Do?

*The journalism that tweaks reality, then reports what happens*

BY DANIEL WEISS

On a Friday morning last January, a group of Washington, D.C., commuters played an unwitting role in an experiment. As they emerged from the L'Enfant Plaza metro station, they passed a man playing a violin. Dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt, baseball cap, and jeans, an open case for donations at his feet, he looked like an ordinary busker. In reality, he was Joshua Bell, an internationally renowned musician. The idea was to gauge

whether Bell's virtuosic playing would entice the rushing commuters to stop and listen.

The experiment's mastermind was *Washington Post* staff writer Gene Weingarten, who had dreamed it up after seeing a talented keyboardist be completely ignored as he played outside another metro station. "I bet Yo-Yo Ma himself, if he were in disguise, couldn't get through to these deadheads," Weingarten says he thought at the time. Ma wasn't available to test the hypothesis, but Bell was.

For three-quarters of an hour, Bell played six pieces, including some of the most difficult and celebrated in the classical canon. Of 1,097 passersby, twenty-seven made donations totaling just over \$30. Seven stopped for more than a minute. The remaining 1,070 breezed by, barely aware of the supremely talented violinist in their midst.

When Weingarten's account of the experiment ran in the *Post's* magazine three months later, readers followed

the narrative with rapt attention that contrasted starkly with the indifference of the commuters. The article was discussed on blogs and other forums devoted to classical music, pop culture, politics, and social science. Weingarten said he received more feedback from readers than he had for any other article he had written in his thirty-five-year career. Many were taken with the chutzpah of disguising Joshua Bell as a mendicant just to see what would happen. Others were shocked that people could ignore a world-class musician. Still others argued that the results were insignificant: rerun the experiment outdoors on a sunny day, they said, and Bell would draw a massive crowd.

I was one of those rapt readers, but I wasn't quite sure what to make of the piece's appeal. Was it just a clever gimmick or was there something more profound going on? At the same time, the story felt familiar. Indeed, Weingarten's experiment was a recent entry in a journalistic genre with deep, quirky roots.

WORKING ON A HUNCH that begs to be tested or simply struck with an idea for a good story, journalistic "experimenters," for lack of a better term, step out of their customary role as observers and play with reality to see what will happen. At their worst, these experiments are little more than variations on reality-TV operations that traffic in voyeurism and shame. At their best, they manage to deliver discussion-worthy insights into contemporary society and human nature. The very best, perhaps, serve up

a bit of both. In any case, the growing number of journalists and news operations who do this sort of thing are heirs to a brand of social psychology practiced from the postwar years through the early seventies. During this period, considered by some the golden age of the discipline, experiments were bold and elaborately designed and frequently produced startling results. Many were conducted outside the laboratory and often placed subjects in stressful or disturbing situations.

These experiments also have roots in forms of investigative, immersion, and stunt journalism that have been practiced for more than a century. In 1887, while working on an exposé of asylum conditions, muckraker Nellie Bly demonstrated that one could feign insanity to gain admission to a madhouse—and when she began to insist that she was in fact perfectly sane, doctors interpreted her claims as delusions. In so doing, Bly anticipated psychologist David Rosenhan's classic 1972 experiment in which "pseudopatients" claiming



to hear voices were admitted to psychiatric hospitals and then kept for an average of several weeks despite reverting to sane behavior.

It's difficult to pinpoint when the genre shifted, but by 1974, when New York City's WNBC-TV asked its viewers to call in and pick the perpetrator of a staged purse snatching from a lineup of suspects, the journalistic experiment had attained its modern form. The station was flooded with calls and, after fielding over 2,100, cut the experiment short. The results: respondents picked the correct assailant no more frequently than they would have by guessing.

Over the last decade, as best-sellers such as *The Tipping Point* and *Freakonomics* have lent social science a sheen of counterintuitive hipness and reality television has tapped into a cultural fascination with how people behave in contrived situations, journalistic experimentation has become increasingly common. In addition to *The Washington Post Magazine*, it has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Harpers*, and *Reader's Digest*. Its most regular home, however, has been on network-television newsmagazines.

ABC's *Primetime* has staged a series of experiments in recent years under the rubric "What Would You Do?" which enact provocative scenarios while hidden cameras capture the reactions of the public. Chris Whipple, the producer who conceived the series, refers to it as a "Candid Camera of ethics." Starting with a nanny verbally abusing a child, the series has gone on to present similar scenarios: an eldercare attendant ruthlessly mocking an old man; a group of adolescents bullying a chubby kid; a man viciously berating his girlfriend, seeming on the verge of violence; etc.

The sequences tend to begin with the narrator pointing out that many pass right by the incident. Several witnesses are confronted and asked to explain why they didn't step in. One man, who gave the fighting couple a long look before continuing on his way, reveals that he is an off-duty cop and says he determined that no laws were being broken, so there was nothing for him to do. The focus shifts to those who did intervene, and the camera lingers over the confrontations, playing up the drama.

These experiments are, in a sense, the flip side of the reality-TV coin: rather than show how people act in manufactured situations when they *know* they're being watched, they show us how people act when they don't. And the experiments have clearly appealed to viewers. From the first minutes of its first hour, when its ratings doubled those of the previous week, "What Would You Do?" has been a success. After appearing periodically in 2005 and 2006, ABC ordered five new hours that were scheduled to air last November before the writers' strike put them on hold. It is, Whipple says, highly "watchable" television.

In the world of print, *Reader's Digest* has come closest to making such experiments a franchise. Over the last two years, the magazine has pitted cities around the world against each other in tests of helpfulness and courtesy, to determine which city is most hospitable. The first round used the following three gauges to separate the rude from the solicitous in thirty-five cities: the percentage of people who picked up papers dropped by an experimenter; the percentage who

held the door for experimenters when entering buildings; and the percentage of clerks who said "Thank you" after a sale. When the scores were tallied, it was clear that *Reader's Digest* had hit the counterintuition jackpot: the winner was New York City. According to Simon Hemelryk, an editor with the UK edition of *Reader's Digest* who came up with the idea for the tests, the press response was "totally, totally mad." Hundreds of media outlets picked up the story. David Letterman presented a tongue-in-cheek, top-ten list of the "Signs New York City Is Becoming More Polite."

The notion that New Yorkers are more polite than commonly believed was also at the center of a 2004 experiment conducted by *The New York Times*. Reenacting an experiment originally performed by graduate students of social psychologist Stanley Milgram at the City University of New York in the early seventies, two *Times* reporters asked riders on crowded subway cars to relinquish their seats. Remarkably, thirteen of fifteen did so. But the reporters found that crossing the unspoken social boundaries of the subway came at a cost: once seated, they grew tense, unable to make eye contact with their fellow passengers. Jennifer Medina, one of the reporters, says that she and Anthony Ramirez, her partner on the story, found the assignment ludicrous at first. "It was like, 'What? Really? You want me to do what?'" she says. "We made so much fun of it while we were doing it, but we got so much feedback. It was one of those stories that people really talked about." And papers around the world took notice: within weeks, reporters in London, Glasgow, Dublin, and Melbourne had repeated the experiment.

IN THESE JOURNALISTIC experiments, the prank always lurks just beneath the surface and is clearly part of the genre's appeal. During ABC *Primetime*'s experiments, there always comes the moment when host John Quiñones enters and, with a soothing voice and congenial smile, ends the ruse. *These people are actors. You have been part of an experiment.* And in that moment, no matter how serious the scenario, there is always the hint of a practical joke revealed, a touch of "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*!"

Sometimes the experiment is overwhelmed by the prank. Last year, *Radar Magazine* sent a reporter to snort confectioner's sugar in various New York City locales. The idea was to test anecdotal evidence from a *New York Times* article that cocaine use was growing more publicly acceptable. (The results: public snorting was actively discouraged at the New York Public Library's main reading room, but not at a Starbucks or *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter's Waverly Inn.) Carter's own *Spy Magazine* pulled a classic prank/experiment in the late eighties when it sent checks of dwindling value to moguls in an attempt to determine who was the cheapest millionaire. (Donald Trump reportedly cashed one for just thirteen cents.) Even *Borat* was, in a sense, an extended experiment in the extremes to which a Kazakh "journalist" could push pliant Americans, and was anticipated by one of *Primetime*'s "What Would You Do?" episodes in which a taxi driver goes off on racist or homophobic rants, baiting riders either to defy him or join in.



If Medina, the *Times* reporter, was made uneasy by the whiff of “stunt” in the subway experiment, she is not the only one. Even Weingarten, whose Joshua Bell experiment was a monumental success, looks at the genre slightly askance. Asked whether he plans to conduct similar experiments in the future, he replies: “If I can think of one this good, there’s no reason I’d quail at it. But, you know, you also don’t want to go off and be the stunt writer. I would need to feel as though the next thing I’m doing was of equal sociological importance. And this wasn’t just a lark. We had something we wanted to examine, and it was the nature of the perception of beauty.”

The appeal of the best journalistic experiments, indeed, runs much deeper than their entertainment value. Medina

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## Bloggers accused *Dateline* of trying to create a racist incident by bringing Arab-looking men to a NASCAR race.

came to see her role in the subway experiment as that of a “street anthropologist or something, which is essentially what [reporters] are supposed to be doing every day.” And Weingarten received over one hundred messages from people who said that his piece on the Bell experiment made them cry. (One testimonial from an online chat Weingarten had with readers: “I cried because I find it scary and depressing to think of how obviously most people go through daily life, even smart and otherwise attentive people. Who knows what beautiful things I’ve missed by just hurrying along lost in my thoughts?”) In essence, many readers imagined themselves as actors in the story. Weingarten set out to chronicle an experiment; he ended up writing a deeply effective profile of his own readers. “What Would You Do?” asks *Primetime*—and that, on some level, is the question that all such journalistic experiments ask. Would you walk by the famous violinist? Would you give up your seat on the subway? Would you protect a woman from an abusive boyfriend?

IN THAT QUIRKY, postwar “golden age” of the discipline that informs today’s journalistic experimenters, researchers captured the public imagination with bold, elaborately choreographed experiments that frequently drove subjects to extreme behavior or confronted them with seemingly life-or-death situations.

Stanley Milgram, the designer of the subway-seat experiment, was one of the most creative social psychologists of that era. His infamous obedience experiment, first performed in 1961, in which subjects were instructed to shock a man in a separate room every time he gave an incorrect answer on a

memory test, showed that normal people were capable of great cruelty. Sixty-five percent of the subjects went to the maximum—450 volts—despite the test-taker’s cries of pain and pleas to be released due to a heart condition. By the end, the test-taker no longer responded at all, having presumably passed out or died. (In reality, the test-taker was an actor and his protests tape-recorded.) Even more unsettling was Stanford professor Philip Zimbardo’s 1971 prison experiment, in which college students randomly assigned to play the role of guards in a mock prison terrorized those playing inmates. Slated to run for two weeks, it was terminated after six days, during which several “prisoners” came close to nervous breakdown.

Given the dramatic nature of these experiments, it’s little wonder they’ve provided such inspiration to journalists. Bill Wasik, an editor at *Harper’s*, started the flash mobs trend in 2003 as an homage to Milgram, whom he considers as much performance artist as scientist. Flash mobs were spontaneous gatherings in which participants showed up at a given location for a brief period and did something absurd, such as drop to their knees en masse before a giant Tyrannosaurus Rex at Toys “R” Us. In a piece published in *Harper’s*, Wasik explained that he saw the mobs as a Milgram-esque test of hipster conformity. Like a hot new indie band, he hypothesized, the mobs would rapidly gain popularity before being discarded as too mainstream and, ultimately, co-opted by marketers, which is more or less what happened.

Wasik argues that the popular resonance of experiments by Milgram and others of the golden age derives from the compelling narratives they created. “It’s like a demonstration whose value is more in the extremes that you can push people to and the extremes of the story that you can get out of what people do or don’t do,” he says. “Milgram could have done an authority experiment in which he got people to do all sorts of strange things that didn’t seem to be simulating the death of the participant.” Many contemporary social psychologists credit researchers from this fertile era with cleverly demonstrating how frequently human behavior defies expectations. But others, such as Joachim Krueger of Brown University, argue that the experiments were designed in ways that guaranteed unflattering results. “You could call it a ‘gotcha psychology,’” he says.

Due in part to the rise of ethical concerns, contemporary social psychologists rarely do experiments that take place outside the laboratory or that involve deception or stressful situations. This has left journalistic experimenters as a sort of lost tribe of devotees of the golden-age social psychologists. Unlike investigative journalism, these experiments have largely flown under the ethical radar. This may be because of the fact that, while some journalistic experiments may be frivolous, they are on balance innocuous. However, as experimenters increasingly tackle sensitive topics, they have begun to draw some heat. In 2006, conservative bloggers accused *Dateline* of trying to manufacture a racist incident by bringing a group of Arab-looking men to a NASCAR race. And, last November, these same bloggers ripped an experiment by *Primetime* in which same-sex couples engaged in public displays of affection in Birmingham, Alabama, for

attempting to provoke homophobic reactions. (As of press time, the same-sex segment had not yet aired, but according to the Fox affiliate in Birmingham, which broke the story, Birmingham police received several complaints from people disgusted by the sight of two men kissing in public.)

But what of the oft-cited "rule" that journalists should report the news rather than make it? Michael Kinsley, who conducted a 1985 experiment while at *The New Republic* to determine whether the Washington, D.C., elite actually read the books they act like they have, rejects the premise. "If you've got no other way to get a good story," he says, "and you're not being dishonest in what you write and publish, what's wrong with it?" Kinsley's experiment involved slipping notes deep into fashionable political books at several D.C. bookstores, offering \$5 to anyone who called an intern at the magazine. In five months, not a single person claimed the reward.

JOURNALISTIC EXPERIMENTS HAVE been criticized far more consistently for their scientific, rather than ethical, shortcomings. Robert Cialdini, an Arizona State University social psychologist, believes strongly in the value of communicating psychological insights via the media, but he has found that journalists don't always value the same material that he does. For a 1997 *Dateline* segment on conformity, he conducted an experiment showing that the number of people who donated to a New York City subway musician multiplied eightfold when others donated before them. A fascinating result, but even more fascinating to Cialdini was that people explained their donations by saying that they liked the song, they had some spare change, or they felt sorry for the musician. These explanations did not end up in the finished program. "To me, that was the most interesting thing, the fact that people are susceptible to these social cues but don't recognize it," says Cialdini. "I think that's my bone to pick with journalists—they're frequently interested in the phenomenon rather than the cause of the phenomenon."

Others are frustrated by the premium journalists place on appealing to a mass audience. Duncan Watts, a Columbia University sociologist, designed an experiment for *Primetime* to test Milgram's small-world theory—commonly known as "six degrees of separation"—that people divided by great social or geographical distance are actually connected by a relatively small number of links. In the experiment, two white Manhattan residents competed to connect with a black boxer from the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn using the fewest links, then the boxer had to connect with a Broadway dancer. All three connections were made using at most six links. Watts says that after the segment aired in late 2006, he received an e-mail from its producer, Thomas Berman, saying that its ratings had been poor. (An ABC spokeswoman insists that the network was satisfied with the ratings.) "One of the limitations of this model is that it's crowd-driven, it's about entertainment," says Watts. "It's a bit of a Faustian bargain."

Another quibble that some social psychologists have with these journalistic experiments is the use of the word

"experiment" to describe them in the first place. To a dyed-in-the-wool researcher, an experiment involves comparing a control group with an experimental one, in which a single condition has been varied so that any changes in the outcome can be clearly attributed. Practically no journalistic "experiment" meets this standard, but many golden-age experiments didn't either, strictly speaking. In addition, practically every journalistic experiment includes a disclaimer that its results are decidedly unscientific.

Wendell Jamieson, city editor at *The New York Times* who assigned the subway-experiment story, chafes at calling the exercise an "experiment," pointing out that it was conducted in connection with another article about the original experiment. "It's just a fun way to take a different approach to a story," Jamieson says, comparing it to when he was at the *New York Daily News* and sent a reporter to Yankee Stadium during a subway series dressed in Mets regalia. "It's tabloid trick two-hundred and fifty-two." Bill Wasik, the *Harper's* editor who started flash mobs, points out that using the word "experiment" is a way for journalists to appropriate the "alpha position" of science, lending their endeavors a sort of added legitimacy. "The piece is wearing a lab coat," Wasik says of his own article, which repeatedly describes flash mobs as an experiment, "but it's not entirely scientific by any means."

Perhaps no media outlet has tried harder to achieve uniformity in conducting its experiments than *Reader's Digest*. Detailed instructions for how to conduct its "studies" are distributed to researchers in more than thirty cities around the world to ensure that their results will be comparable. For the courtesy tests, researchers were told how long dropped papers were to be left on the ground, how far to walk behind people entering buildings to see whether they would hold the door, and what sort of demeanor to adopt when speaking with clerks who were being tested to see whether they would say "Thank you." Nonetheless, despite all the careful planning, New York City's courtesy title may need to be affixed with an asterisk. Robert Levine, a social psychologist at California State University, Fresno, did a series of helpfulness experiments in the early nineties in which New York City placed dead last out of thirty-six United States cities. While this doesn't necessarily contradict the *Reader's Digest* result, in which New York was the only U.S. city tested among a global selection of cities, Levine points out that all the *Reader's Digest* New York tests were carried out at Starbucks, yielding a potentially skewed sample. What if Starbucks employees and customers are simply more courteous than New Yorkers as a whole? "I'm not saying they screwed up," says Levine, "but that was certainly a flag that was raised for me."

So maybe journalists can and should be more careful in how they design experiments, but that debate, in many ways, is beside the point. The best examples of the genre are undeniably good journalism, and the lesser lights, for the most part, amount to innocuous entertainment. Indeed, my hope is that some enterprising reporter is even now hatching a plan to find out whether Joshua Bell really would draw such a big crowd outdoors on a sunny day in D.C. **CJR**

DANIEL WEISS is a freelance writer based in New York City.

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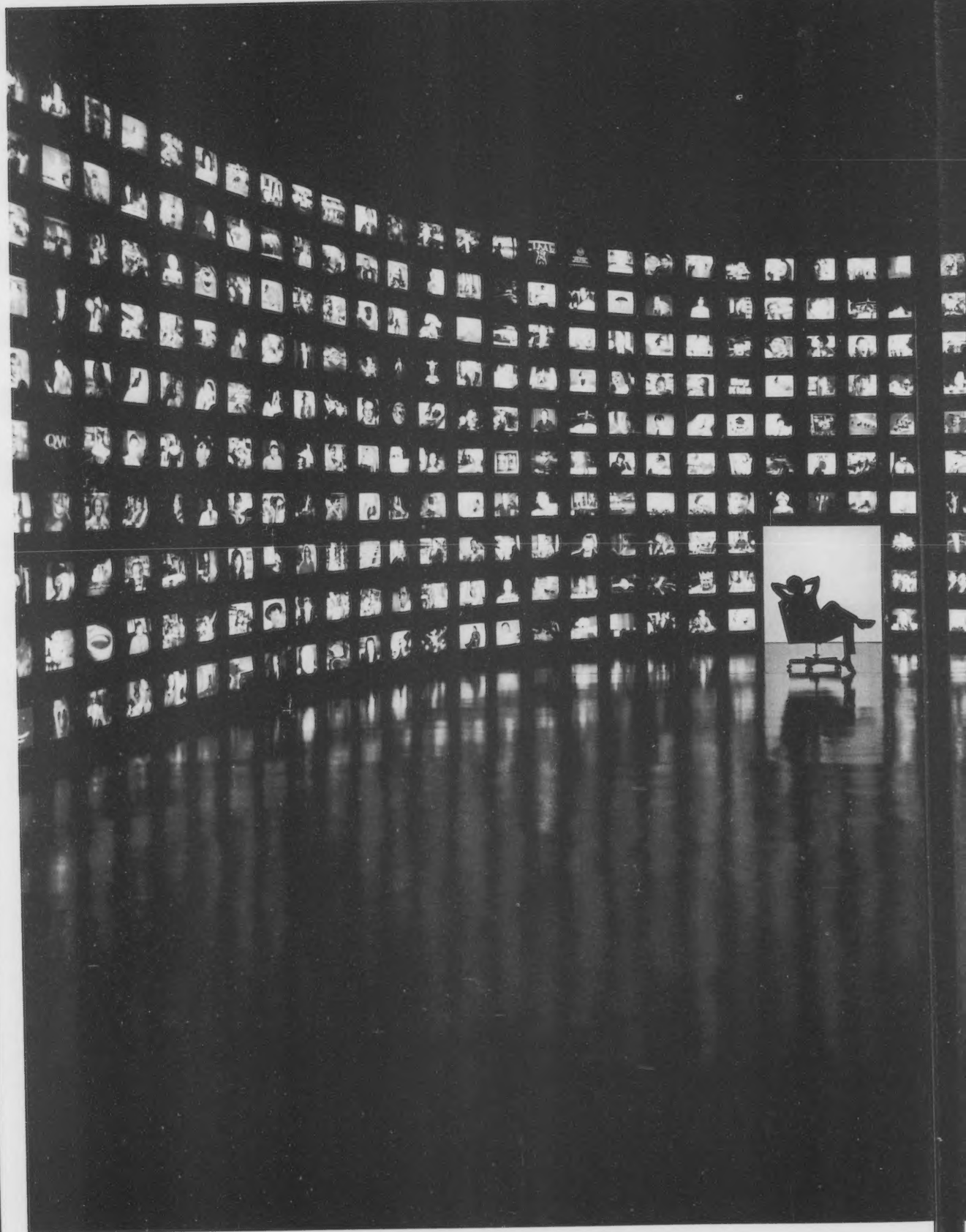
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# Ideas + Reviews

ESSAY

## *Big Fish and Small Fry*

*In his new book, Robert McChesney overstates the threat to democracy posed by corporate media*

BY CARLIN ROMANO

Your average scoop-minded journalist would rather see his expenses cut by 90 percent, or face a plagiarism charge spotlighted by Romanesko, than read a book by a communication scholar.

It's a blunt calculation of lesser pain. The first two assaults can be fought and repulsed. The third lasers into that part of a journalist's brain that craves constant feeding of germane fact, persuasive evidence, sensible argument, even-handed analysis, and lively style. Fairly or not, the mainstream reporter presumes that while some books by communication scholars provide all five, that's only by the logician's criterion that some means at least one.

Another psychological bent accounts for the aversion of journalists to communication scholarship. The scholars themselves would describe it as "theory aversion," but it's more aptly described as "theory immersion"—the feeling, similar to relaxing in a warm bath, in which one's view of the media world appears both true and practicable in professional life.

Call it the "naturalistic" take on American media. It posits that the shape of the American media landscape reflects two-hundred-plus years of free agents—individual journalists, daring entrepreneurs, aggressive corporations—pursuing their interests in more or less legal fashion, with those interests variously including profit, truth, influence, fame, and, usually, more profit. As Walter Cronkite put it in what's now deemed a Neolithic, pre-postmodernist era, that's the way it is, and likely the way it's supposed to be.

A third aspect of communication scholarship also estranges working journalists. If they've sampled the wares, journalists notice that communication scholars view them not so much as fellow media types, or even "informants," in the manner of anthropologists and linguists, but as worker ants—insects in an organism to be studied aloofly and from afar.

If there's any communication scholar likely to bridle at being victimized by these clichés or truisms of the journalistic mindset, it's Robert McChesney. A darling of leftist intellectuals, McChesney, a fifty-five-year-old veteran scholar who teaches at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is an influential populist highly critical of many colleagues in communication studies.

An activist instrumental in the nationwide movement for media reform, McChesney co-founded the reformist lobbying group Free Press in 2002 (now some 350,000 members strong) and co-launched the National Conference for Media Reform, which has grown from an anticipated few hundred attendees to some 3,500 from all fifty states in 2007.

McChesney has helped win concrete freedom-of-the-press victories, such as delaying the 2003 FCC attempt to relax media ownership rules, and stopping a 2006 overhaul of telecommunications laws that would have threatened "Net Neutrality" (the policy that blocks Internet service providers from discriminating among Web sites). Among his many books, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (1999), stands as a bible and play-book for those who share his reformist passion and anticorporate reading of media history. Now McChesney's fresh size-up of American democracy and media, *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media*, offers a manifesto that invites concerned parties to weigh the pros and cons of communication scholarship goosed up to activist mode.

In his introduction, McChesney roars with to-the-barricades themes and hortatory clichés not likely to pull in skeptical journalists. "The history of American media," he declares, "is one continual victory of powerful corporate interests over everyone else." Both our communication system and revolution are not natural consequences of a free market but "the result of structures and markets created and shaped by policies and extraordinary public subsidies." If citizens of good will—a coalition of the willing?—don't respond to McChesney's "all hands on deck" appeal, "crucial policy decisions will be made by powerful corporate interests and the politicians they own behind closed doors, and the system will be created to suit their needs." A key reason that citizens should do so, McChesney contends repeatedly, is that we are at a "critical juncture." It's an empty phrase he fetishizes and reifies as a virtual discovery of physics—by it, he means a one- or two-decade era such as Reconstruction or the New Deal in which great sociological changes are possible in a way they're not at other times.

"In this historic moment," McChesney tells us, "there is a particularly important role for communication scholars and students to play." He wants "the field of communication to fundamentally rethink its past, present, and future." A key purpose of *Communication Revolution*, after all, is to explain McChesney's

## Isn't it more congruent with democratic theory that minor-media truth will win in the marketplace over corporate-media blather?

movement for structural media reform, whose aims include "keeping the largest telephone and cable companies from privatizing the Internet," protecting children from all advertising, creating "super-fast ubiquitous broadband" as "a birthright of all Americans," and developing "a viable heterogeneous tier of noncommercial and nonprofit media."

Apart from McChesney's claims, it's obligatory to ponder *Communication Revolution* as performance art, because it is in his rhetoric that he differs from many academic peers. McChesney has reached sufficient lightning-rod status that he often feels the need to explain himself. One bubbling-up of this sort comes in his introduction:

My second problem stared at me every time I looked in the mirror: What to do about myself. What role should I play in the narrative?... But I did not want to write an autobiography or memoir, and this book can in no way be considered as such. The book is not about me, but about the issues addressed herein.

Of course it's not about him—even if he does later interrupt the text regularly with such asides as, "Whether I liked it or not, people were demanding I address the contemporary situation. And I discovered quickly enough that I liked it."

His taste for passive-aggressive navel-gazing combines with endless repetition to make much of *Communication Revolution* tough slogging. Chapter 1 begins:

We are in the midst of a communication and information revolution. Of that there is no doubt. What is uncertain is what type of revolution this will be, how sweeping, and with what effects. Precisely how this commu-

nication revolution will unfold and what it will mean for our journalism, our culture, our politics, and our economics are not at all clear.

If you edit copy for a living, you'll notice that the fourth sentence repeats the third, and the second is either meaningless or false. The whole can be cut to: "We're in a communication revolution with uncertain effects." We're dealing, in short, with a flabbily written book. We now suspend our regularly scheduled nasty review to concentrate on the content McChesney offers to journalists: distilled, analyzed, criticized, and appreciated.

One service is a full-frontal attack on communication for becoming a "second-tier" discipline by abandoning the critical edge toward media industries that communication scholars evinced in the 1920s and '30s. McChesney quotes Wolfgang Donsbach, a recent president of the International Communication Association, who complains that there's "too much petty number-crunching" in the field, too many research projects of "little relevance and significance."

McChesney then offers a travelogue, in Chapter 2, of his own journey through the subfield of the political economy of communication, which allowed him to bring his reading of Marx, and concern with social justice, to the architecture of American media. In his early years as a professor, it struck him that true media criticism had fallen to thinkers outside communication, such as C. Wright Mills and Jürgen Habermas, who kept alive big-picture accounts of media life that did not assume false dichotomies such as commercialized media or state-run dictatorial media. McChesney absorbed media critics from other disciplines, such as Noam Chomsky and the

economist Edward Herman, who wrote unconstrained by what he regarded as the phony neutrality of the mainstreamers. Reading Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* in 1986, McChesney explains, provided the epiphany that expanded his growing hostility to the notion among journalists and communication scholars that "the commercial media system was innately democratic and quintessentially American." Bagdikian showed, he explains, how a commercial media system undermines democracy.

This trip down memory lane inspires one of McChesney's best passages:

When, exactly, did Americans approve of the idea that a handful of corporations selling advertising were the proper stewards of the media or that it was inappropriate to ever question their power? I knew enough even then to understand that at the time of the Founders, there was no sense of professional journalism, media corporations, or modern advertising. So no way could it be said that the Founders authorized or sounded off on the mess Bagdikian was describing. But if not them, then who? When in American history had this debate taken place? When had the American people ratified the corporate media system as the proper one for the United States?

McChesney immediately bolsters these sharp questions by giving details of what he dubs the "last great battle over media in the United States," the mostly forgotten opposition to the mass commercialization of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and '30s by "educators, labor, religious groups, journalists, civil libertarians, and farmers."

*Communication Revolution* gets better as McChesney concentrates reportorially on histories of areas he knows well, including cultural studies. He explains the friction between mainstream scholars "eager to ramp up" the prestige of communication within the social sciences by heavy use of quantitative methods, and political-economy sorts fond of "historical and multidisciplinary" approaches. McChesney rightly vaunts the distinguished First Amendment scholar Alexander Meiklejohn's argument that while the First Amendment forbids legislation to abridge freedom of speech, it does not forbid legislation

"to enlarge and enrich it." Yale First Amendment scholar Thomas Emerson also argued, writes McChesney, that in the 1930s nothing in the Constitution "prevented the government from establishing a completely nonprofit radio and television system."

Fired up by this dystopic vision of corporate-despoiled media, McChesney offers up "Five Truths"—it's not clear whether he misses or actually enjoys the phrase's Maoist tone—that should make "all media scholars reconsider the core presuppositions upon which their research and teaching have been based." The "Truths" are:

1. Media systems are created by policies and subsidies; they are not "natural" in any society.
2. The Founders of the Republic did not authorize a corporate-run, profit-motivated, commercially driven media system with the First Amendment.
3. The American media system may be profit-motivated, but it is not a free-market system.
4. The policymaking process is of paramount importance in understanding how a media system is structured and how the subsidies are allocated.
5. The policymaking process in the United States has been dominated by powerful corporate interests with almost nonexistent public participation for generations; it must be addressed if the media system is to be reformed.

Accepting the first four, of course, doesn't commit one to wholly buying the fifth, or sharing McChesney's assessment of where American media end up today.

The second half of *Communication Revolution* then tilts toward McChesney's activist history. Although he distinguishes on the one hand between editors and reporters—with whom communication scholars should seek solidarity—and investors and owners, who are plainly the enemy, it's clear that McChesney sees the former as largely stooges in their habits of coverage. If "the public has no role to play in the policymaking process," McChesney knows why: "[B]ecause the news media almost never cover this story in the general news, 99 percent of the public has no idea what is going on."

That exaggeration, typical of McChesney, suggests one of the many

angles from which he's vulnerable to criticism. What of his own account of thousands of media activists rising up to combat Washington in recent years? Doesn't that indicate that our media structure has produced a public aware of what's going on? McChesney practically brags about his discovery, during his later activist period, that media policymaking is less about liberals vs. conservatives than "a case of moneyed interests versus everyone else." As a result, he submits, "Media reform, rather than being the last issue people will turn to, may actually be a gateway issue for political engagement."

McChesney's thoughts on this point are illuminating. "The people who became active in the fight over media ownership," he reports, "were motivated by a variety of issues," among them "unhappiness about the limited and unimaginative musical fare found on radio," the "paucity of quality programs," and the "general decline of resources for journalism." He consequently believes the media-reform movement could resemble the environmental-reform movement, which went from fringe in the 1960s to crucial for any politician fifteen years later.

Yet thinking about that social dynamic undermines McChesney's larger perspective on American media rather than bolsters it. His thousands of media activists presumably read about their inadequacies in the kinds of publications he writes for: *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Mother Jones*, *In These Times*. That signals the core philosophical weakness in McChesney's inference that corporate domination of big media undermines democratic pluralism of ideas. It's a fundamental tenet of McChesney's work that "structural reform of the media system and society" is necessary if we are "serious about democracy." But why? Oddly for a critic of capitalism, McChesney's view proposes a market-share credentialing of democracy. If certain ideas, anti-capitalist and otherwise, don't get the airtime bestowed by network news, or the privileged print space provided by *The New York Times* op-ed page, democracy is threatened.

Where, though, does the First Amendment or democratic theory require that? We may want greater market share for ideas we favor, but what's the principled argument that we're entitled



to it? Monopolistic control of major media damages democracy only if it results in the citizenry not receiving the broadness of information it needs to run its own affairs in the manner desired by Jefferson and Madison.

Has that happened in the U.S.? Perhaps appropriate broadness of information currently coexists with quasi-monopolistic control because the quasi-monopolies cynically distribute that degree of information to keep their enterprises vibrant and extant, or because minor media and bloggers fill in the gaps. If American citizen "Jose Garcia" can get all the information McChesney or John Dewey might think he needs to be a fully effective citizen by regularly reading *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*—and *In These Times*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Nation*—how does dominance by corporate media frustrate the democratic abilities of citizens? McChesney endlessly cites Madison and Jefferson, but neither they nor any logic implicit in democratic political theory requires people to get their best information from mainstream media. It may not be pleasant for one's favored media to be small fry, but McChesney provides no argument for why mini truth-tellers among the maxi-deceivers don't meet the constitutional aims of the Framers, who were concerned with availability of ideas, not market control.

That core incoherence in McChesney's media worldview suggests connected difficulties. Isn't it ultimately more congruent with democratic theory, not to mention freedom-of-speech doctrine straight out of Mill, that minor-media truth will win in the marketplace over corporate-media blather, regardless of original market share? McChesney's philosophical deafness here is odd, given that he admits it's possible to couple his belief that government policies largely created our corporate-dominated media system with the position that the historical result operates fairly well—a stance with which he disagrees, but that he respectfully ascribes to Paul Starr in that scholar's highly regarded *The Creation of the Media*.

Other missteps damage McChesney's appeal as a media theorist. For instance, he takes the rightness of many of his media-policy positions for granted, at

least here. On macro issues, he mostly assumes he's writing to a leftist audience—he concedes that "the political economy of communication" in which he grew up was "the almost exclusive province of the Left"—and so peppers his sentences with solidarity-seeking buzz phrases like references to our "unnecessary, illegal, and disastrous war." He states repeatedly that if American media exist mainly "to serve elite interests," they're a disaster, even though someone on the right might find that leaning unproblematic so long as every slice of society retains access to media that reflect its interests. On micro matters, he's against TV advertising to children and candidate political advertising, and in favor of nonprofit media and multiple newsrooms in communities, but takes the benefits of those positions to be obvious.

Finally, many of McChesney's casual claims about corporate media ring false because they exaggerate. He writes that in the "U.S. commercial media system... everything is directed at maximizing profits, and everything else is pretty much public relations." But journalists who have worked in a quality media organization can cite innumerable times when the newspaper or station did a story that cost lots of money, and brought down the profit margin, for nonfinancial reasons similar to those that drive McChesney's ambitions. And they did so with the support of executives responsible for that bottom line. McChesney's blunderbuss indictment of corporate media managers as robotically profit-oriented utterly misses, in ivory-tower fashion, the systematic subversion of corporate profit goals by corporate journalists. For a self-anointed realist about journalism, McChesney comes across as someone who knows it only as an academic subject.

Yet despite all these imperfections, I wish more mainstream journalists would read him and other communication scholars. McChesney is utterly right that many journalists and Americans wrongly see the U.S. media system as "natural" when it's a construct of policy choices and power politics, albeit within constitutional parameters. It might open the eyes of non-scholars to know, as McChesney writes in praising the fine research of John Durham Peters, that

the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor glibly tossed out by talk-show pundits as a foundational principle first came into use in the 1930s and grew common only two decades after that.

Perhaps journalists would report more on the astonishing giveaway of the public spectrum to corporations, or launch investigative series on the Interdepartment Radio Advisory Committee within the Commerce Department, which, according to McChesney, allocates almost half the government's spectrum in classified secrecy that resembles that around the Pentagon's black budget. Maybe they'd recognize that, as McChesney aptly writes, "There is often a tension between the needs of property and the needs of democracy," and that the former doesn't automatically win under democratic theory. Knowing what communication scholars often know might make both journalists and ordinary Americans more unruly, less sheep-like, when their fates and those of the media institutions they depend upon are decided over their heads.

McChesney closes with a canny hypothetical. Imagine, he asks, that:

the federal government had issued an edict demanding that there be a sharp reduction in international journalism, or that local newsrooms be closed or their staffs and budgets slashed. Imagine if the president had issued an order that news media concentrate upon celebrities and trivia, rather than rigorously investigate and pursue scandals and lawbreaking in the White House.... Professors of journalism and communication would have gone on hunger strikes... entire universities would have shut down in protest. Yet, when quasi-monopolistic commercial interests effectively do pretty much the same thing, and leave our society as impoverished culturally... it passes with only minor protest in most journalism and communication programs.

Over the top, sure, but it makes you think. **CJR**

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## Uncomfortable Truth

*P. Sainath reminds us that India is still a poor country*

BY NARESH FERNANDES

ONE EVENING, A COUPLE OF SUMMERS ago, *The Times of India* organized a free classical music concert at an amphitheater cut into a hill along Bombay's coast. It was a stunning locale, with the sea in the distance and twinkling stars overhead. All around the stage, giant canvasses depicted idyllic scenes of a futuristic Bombay—a city whose contemporary counterpart is an urban nightmare so disturbing, it is the object of intense study by planners and social scientists from around the world. More than 55 percent of the city's 13 million residents live in slums, while poorly built drainage systems leave even newly constructed office districts flooded after heavy rains. But in *The Times of India's* utopian vision, Bombay was bathed in the colors of sunset, as birds swooped amid glass-and-steel buildings. To the immediate right of the musicians, for instance, was an enormous image of the completed Bandra Worli Sea Link, a bridge that is being built across an inlet of the Arabian Sea. When it is ready—though no one is sure when exactly that will be—city administrators hope the Sea Link will speed the crawl from the suburbs to the southern office districts. Rush-hour traffic in Bombay now moves at less than twelve kilometers an hour.

Before the musicians could really get going, the marketing manager of *The Times*—which claims to be the best-selling, English-language broadsheet in the world—came out to rally the audience. “Do you believe we have the potential to become a world-class city?” she shouted. The crowd of middle-class Bombay residents bellowed its assent, unmindful of the fact that when the Bandra Worli Sea Link is complete, it will conduct thousands of honking, roaring cars and trucks within 150 meters of the venue in which they were sitting, making music performances (and even lingering conversations) impossible. More alarming, environmentalists believe that the Sea Link was directly responsible for many of the 452 deaths that resulted from a freak cloudburst in 2005: the construction of the bridge narrowed the mouth of a vital drainage channel that flows into the bay, making it incapable of handling the heavy rain and causing a flood upstream

**We talk of journalism that stands the test of time. *Second Read* is an exploration of that notion—journalists reflecting on books and other works that shaped their own writing, or whose lessons remain relevant.**

**Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts**  
By Palagummi Sainath  
Penguin Books  
1996

that inundated several neighborhoods along the banks of the channel.

The audience's enthusiastic approval of the dubious suggestion that Bombay (which I prefer to the official, Mumbai) stands on the brink of greatness was just another indication of the cocoon of willful ignorance in which India's middle and upper classes have chosen to seclude themselves when it comes to their country's economic situation. This sliver of India's population—estimated at 200 million people—has disproportionately enjoyed the benefits of the country's 9 percent surge of economic growth in recent years, and is now among the most courted groups of consumers on the planet. It has grabbed the attention of producers of so-called FMCGs—or “fast-moving consumer goods”—from around the world. Even luxury brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton have set up shop in India, encouraged by the fact that the country is home to the world's fourth-largest number of billionaires. All the cheerleading about India's future, though, ignores the reality that a full 77 percent of the country's population of just over 1.1 billion is struggling on less than fifty cents a day. While a tiny percentage of the population, mainly in the cities, enjoys a level of affluence unimaginable a generation ago, rural India—home to more than 70 percent of the country's population—is wracked by a man-made agricultural crisis that has driven nearly 150,000 farmers to commit suicide between 1997 and 2005, the latest year for which figures are available. But such stories find relatively little space in most of India's English-language newspapers and on television news shows, which are the primary sources of news and information for the country's urban elite. (Hindi is the national language, but most businessmen, senior bureaucrats, the higher courts, and the best universities use English. While Hindi- and regional-language newspapers often cover stories about the countryside more intensely, their increasingly local focus, facilitated by new technology that allows narrowly zoned editions, means that these issues are rarely seen from a national perspective.)

The journalist Palagummi Sainath says this growing economic gulf between India's elite and the vast majority of its population has created a similar

disconnect "between mass media and mass reality." Sainath, now the rural affairs editor of *The Hindu*, one of the few remaining English-language broadsheets devoted to serious journalism, is the author of *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts*, perhaps the most admired collection of reportage to have been published in India in the last two decades. His series of meticulously reported articles about the lives of India's most underprivileged was written between May 1993 and June 1995 (the articles were collected in a book in 1996), soon after the country began to restructure its economy in accordance with the prescriptions of free-market advocates. But even that early in the so-called "liberalization" process, it was clear that the withdrawal of agricultural subsidies and ill-considered budget cuts were causing great distress in a country that is still overwhelmingly rural. Re-reading *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* today is a startling reminder of how much English-language journalism has changed in India—and how quickly. Today, it's difficult to imagine most broadsheets investing so much money or devoting quite so much space to stories that don't directly relate to their "TG," or target group, an ungainly piece of marketing jargon that is commonly used in many newsrooms as a synonym for "reader."

Though the crisis in the countryside has only grown since Sainath wrote *Drought*, forcing millions of farmers to abandon their plots and seek employment in cities, many of India's English-language newspapers are transforming themselves into halls of mirrors, focusing only on news that they believe will interest their elite readers. This metamorphosis is the product both of a perfervid neo-liberal climate in which everything, including the news, has become a commodity that's up for sale, and of a generational shift in newspaper ownership. As in many parts of the world, India's newspapers are family-owned and run. In the four decades after independence in 1947, many of the proprietors were content to let journalists make the decisions about editorial content. This relatively hands-off approach was a legacy of the freedom struggle, which nationalist newspapers had shaped and help to sustain.

But since the 1990s, a new generation of newspaper owners has adopted a number-crunching approach to journalism. Many of them view the news merely as the stuff between the ads. In some cases, they've even attempted to ensure that the editorial content is designed to create an environment that's conducive to attracting advertising. Taking this attitude to the extreme, *The Times of India* has set up a unit called Medianet that actually sells editorial space to advertisers. With uncharacteristic coyness, the unit's Web site says that it provides "comprehensive media coverage and content solutions to clients."

So while the readers of English-language newspapers are served supplements with titles like "Splurge," in which they can learn all about holidays in Monaco and the latest yachts, they are denied the information they need to understand how projects like the Bandra Worli Sea Link or the upheaval on the country's farms are affecting their lives.

*The Times of India*, which claims a readership of approximately 1.7 million in Bombay and 6.8 million countrywide, has advocated the concept of "aspirational journalism." The paper, for which I once worked, is now run by Samir Jain and his brother, Vineet. They have often told their journalists that the *Times* must help readers forget the mundane reality of their lives and show them the possibilities of what their new affluence can bring. Famously, Samir Jain once ordered his journalists in Bombay to stop reporting on the garbage that frequently is left uncollected in the city's streets because of inefficient city administrators. "Our readers have difficult lives," he told me at the only meeting I ever had with him. "We should put a smile to their faces every morning instead of reminding them of their problems."

Jain's enormously profitable publication has set an example that many other newspapers have followed. Many of India's English-language newspapers have abandoned the responsibility of being the fourth pillar of democracy (a role that many of them had first begun to embrace during the struggle for independence against the British). Now, they claim that they are mere content providers devoted to delivering to advertisers the largest number of eyeballs possible.

As a result, the increasing divide between rich and poor that is a consequence of new economic policies introduced in the early 1990s—which include a predilection for privatizing even profitable public enterprises and slashing subsidies in several sectors, including health and education—is not really part of the public discourse. India ranks 128th on the United Nation's human-development index—which measures life expectancy, educational standards, and standard of living—below such economic tigers as the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, and Guatemala. The themes around which *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* is organized—debt, health, education, displacement, irrigation—remain the biggest problems India must tackle if it is to improve the lives of *all* its citizens. Yet despite the obvious problems, large sections of the country's English-language press operate as though they are allies of the state in a national project to convince citizens that India is predestined to soar to global supremacy. That sentiment was highlighted in a recent *Times of India* advertising campaign that had as its punch line the phrase, "India Poised," suggesting that the nation stood on the precipice of imminent greatness. (Ironically, it was the *Times* that first published Sainath's searing reportage that eventually became *Drought*. In fact, the newspaper gave him a fellowship to fund his research, when the father of the present owners was chairman of the company.)

I first met Sainath in 1992, when he wrote a column called "The Last Page" for *Blitz*, a left-wing tabloid that was then wavering in its political principles. Each week, his column would tackle a wildly varying subject—the injustice of international patent law, the absurdity of the government's agrarian policies, the hypocrisies of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party—with the delicate wit and insight that would later characterize *Drought*. I'd already heard about his legendary charisma: Sainath had taught a journalism class at a local women's college for several years, and after they graduated, his awe-struck students would gush about his talent during tea breaks in newsrooms across the country. He won the *Times* fellowship and went out on the road shortly after I made his acquaintance, but by then



**Who will tell the story?** Sainath at work on a farm in the state of Orissa, India, in 2001.

he'd already encouraged me to expand the range of my reading (he introduced me to Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama* and later gifted me a copy of Graham Hancock's *Lords of Poverty*), and left me with the realization that poverty needed to be reported as a process, not as a series of glaring events, such as starvation deaths, or famine.

Magnitude is among India's defining characteristics, and Indian journalists are often overwhelmed by—and myopically focused on—the statistics and those glaring events (consider that half of all Indian children under four are malnourished, the number of illiterate Indians today is larger than the country's total population when it won independence, and one of every three people in the world suffering from tuberculosis is Indian). But in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, Sainath brings to life the tragedies that lurk in the gray print of official reports—he shows us the structural reasons for poverty. Few Indian journalists had undertaken the kind of rigorous reporting trips that he had, even in the pre-liberalization period, when journalism that sought out the view from soci-

ety's margins was a much more valued endeavor. Sainath traveled more than 80,000 bumpy kilometers through the country's ten poorest districts—the basic administrative units that comprise India's states—to learn how the country's poor survive during the 200–240 days after the spring and winter crops have been harvested, when there is no agricultural work to be had.

The coping strategies he found were astonishing. As he writes, "Some of them [are] quite ingenious, all of them back-breaking." In Godda, in the northern state of Bihar, Sainath followed a man named Kishan Yadav on a sixty-kilometer journey as the laborer pushed a reinforced bicycle piled with 250 kilograms of low-grade coal scavenged from the waste dumps of mines all the way to the market. The three-day ordeal, repeated twice a week, was how 3,000 men in the district kept their families alive—a miracle, it would seem, because they earned only about ten rupees (about twenty-five cents at the time) a day. In Ramnad, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, Sainath spent time with twenty-seven-year-old Ratnapandi Nadar, who eked out a

living tapping palm trees for sap that could be boiled into a sweetener called "jaggery." Nadar worked a sixteen-hour day that began at three in the morning, climbing at least forty trees. "That is roughly equivalent to walking up and down a building of 250 floors daily, using the staircase," notes Sainath.

In a country where poverty is depressingly visible all the time, many middle-class Indians have developed blinders to the distress around them. Sainath's great achievement was to make readers start to pay attention to their poorer countrymen. His lucid writing, so evident in these powerful portraits, had much to do with this. Too often, reportage on poverty is unrelentingly grim, weighed down by a severity that deters all but the most determined readers. But *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, in addition to being marked by a profound empathy for its subjects, is leavened with black humor. That quality is especially on display when Sainath describes the absurd theater of poverty-alleviation programs and the industry that has sprung up to help "uplift" the less fortunate, to use a verb frequently



employed by Indian bureaucrats.

Among the pieces that best illustrate this tragicomedy is a story from Nupada in Orissa, in which Sainath tells of Mangal Sunani's delight when the government gifted him a cow as part of a poverty-reduction scheme. Officials told Sunani that he and scores of others in the district (who were also given cows) would prosper after their animals were impregnated with the semen of a Jersey bull, thereby producing high-yield cows and other bulls. The officials even gave Sunani an acre of land for free, so that he could grow fodder for the cattle, and offered to pay him the minimum daily wage to work the plot. To ensure that the cows didn't accidentally mate with a local bull, all the male cattle in the region were castrated.

Two years later, the community only had eight crossbred calves; many other calves had died shortly after they were born because the crossbred cows were susceptible to disease. By then, the local, hardier species of cattle had been wiped out because of the castration drive and the cow herders were forced to buy milk from the market. When they attempted to grow vegetables on the patches of land they'd been given, officials were annoyed: they wouldn't be paid their wage if they raised anything but fodder, the villagers were warned. Sainath dryly headlined the piece, *VERY FEW SPECIMENS—BUT A LOT OF BULL*.

The ludicrousness of the situation even creeps into the names of some of the places from which the dispatches have been filed. One report is from a region of Orissa state that is officially called Cut-Off Area, home to the residents of 152 villages who are stranded on islands in a reservoir created by a dam built in the 1960s to generate hydroelectricity. Though these villagers saw their farms submerged when the power project was constructed, almost none of them actually has electricity at home. Sainath points out that between 1951 and 1990, more than 26 million Indians have been displaced by development projects. But the rewards of these dams, canals, and mines have rarely trickled down to the so-called beneficiaries. It's a section of the book that has special resonance today, given that the Indian government has recently approved the creation of

close to four hundred Special Economic Zones, which has resulted in even more farmers being pressured to sell off their land cheaply. The government hopes to attract more investment by giving firms that open offices in the SEZs incentives such as tax holidays and flexible labor regulations. As of early October 2007, just over five-hundred square kilometers had been acquired for these zones. In *Drought*, Sainath writes, "If the costs [the poor] bear are the price of development, then the rest of the nation is having a free lunch."

Driven by the conviction that, as he suggests, "the press can and does make a difference when it functions" because "governments do react and respond" to reportage, Sainath's commitment to telling the stories of the neglected was obvious from his enormous personal investment in *Drought*: his fellowship grant was too small to match his ambition, so he kicked in all his retirement savings. Ironically, by the time the pieces were finally collected as a book in 1996, the business managers who had wrested control of newsrooms from the journalists weren't interested in supporting this kind of journalism. Though the book had fired the imaginations of young journalists across India, almost no publications have been willing to invest the resources necessary to allow lengthy investigations into the causes—or processes—of poverty and deprivation. (Today, only *The Hindu*, its sister publication, *Frontline* magazine, and *Teelka*, a weekly magazine, seem to regularly find the space for stories about the millions who have been left behind by India's economic surge.) Nonetheless, the book earned Sainath a string of awards both at home and abroad. He has used some of the money he's received from these awards to establish fellowships for rural reporters, giving journalists in small towns who write in regional languages the opportunity and the training to more effectively tell the stories of the countryside. For his part, Sainath, now fifty, continues to write for *The Hindu* about the economic forces that have pushed thousands of debt-ridden farmers to commit suicide in recent years.

In the last chapter of the book, Sainath considers the role the press could play in promoting genuine development

in India. He notes that even when rural stories do find their way into the newspapers, journalists often tend to turn the nongovernmental agencies that have proliferated across the subcontinent into heroes, even though their strategies are often suspect. Covering development "calls for placing people and their needs at the centre of the stories. Not any intermediaries, however saintly," he stresses. He also suggests journalists must begin to pay more attention to rural "political action and class conflict," even at the risk of being labeled leftist. "Evading reality helps no one," he writes. "A society that does not know itself cannot cope."

But that's unlikely to happen as newspapers devote their attention to providing infotainment to consumers, rather than news to citizens. Nonetheless, readers of *The Times of India* were pleasantly surprised a few months ago to wake up to a new advertising campaign for the newspaper featuring the subcontinent's most famous film star, Amitabh Bachchan, admitting that the burst of economic growth had failed to benefit the country's poorest. "There are two Indias in this country," he declared in a television commercial shot on the contentious Bandra Worli Sea Link.

However, Bachchan's scriptwriter had a novel take on the crisis: he blamed the poor for preventing India from realizing its true potential. As he potters around the 5.6-kilometer bridge, Bachchan says, "One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been recently showering upon us. The other India is the leash."

At the end of the long spot (which runs two minutes, thirteen seconds), Bachchan declares, "The ride has brought us to the edge of time's great precipice. And one India—a tiny little voice at the back of the head—is looking down at the bottom of the ravine and hesitating. The other India is looking up at the sky and saying, 'It's time to fly.'" Bachchan then strides off purposefully across the bridge, even though the middle span hasn't been constructed yet. But the camera, as is often the case these days, doesn't follow him to his logical end. **CJR**

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# May I Speak Freely?

*The First Amendment's march to triumph*

BY ARYEH NEIER

IT IS OUR MISFORTUNE THAT ANTHONY Lewis stopped writing his column for *The New York Times* in 2001. For more than thirty years, that column was the first place to look for commentary about public affairs that was informed by a deep knowledge of and commitment to constitutional rights, expressed clearly, gracefully, and forcefully. Lewis's retirement deprived us of his voice just at the moment when Dick Cheney, David Addington, John Yoo, John Ashcroft, Viet Dinh, Alberto Gonzales, John Roberts, and all the other president's men began rewriting the rules on wiretapping, prolonged detention without trial, habeas corpus, torture, military commissions, secret evidence, and, above all, the claimed authority of President Bush, as commander in chief, to exercise sole and unlimited power on matters involving national security. Though the post-9/11 assault on civil liberty is only touched upon glancingly in *Freedom for the Thought That We Hate*, Lewis's short book is nevertheless a reminder of what we have been missing.

In the United States, as Lewis's tales of the First Amendment confirm, the power vested in the courts to interpret the Constitution helped us to resist tyranny. And the area where we have fared best is this book's subject: the First Amendment right to speak and publish. In that crucial respect, the present era differs markedly from previous periods when rights were under attack. From the time of the Sedition Act of 1798, to the period during and right after World War I when there were thousands of state and federal prosecutions for speech, to the post-World War II red scare, and again during the Nixon years when political surveillance reached a high point, the hallmark of repression was the effort to curb dissent. Not so today. The protections forged in the court cases discussed by Lewis in this book have by now gained such widespread acceptance that they are not seriously threatened by the "war on terror." All of us continue to be free to speak out against abuses by our government.

Lewis derives the title of his book from one of the legendary dissents by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. The case was *United States v. Schwimmer*, decided by the high court in 1929. A middle-aged pacifist immigrant from Hungary, Rosika Schwimmer, was denied citizenship because she refused to swear that she would take up arms to defend the United States. Holmes, who had

**Freedom for the Thought That We Hate: A Biography of the First Amendment**  
By Anthony Lewis  
Basic Books  
240 pages, \$25

been a Union soldier in the Civil War (he was eighty-eight when he dissented in *Schwimmer*) and wounded three times, had little use for pacifist opinions. Yet he wrote, in words that remain stirring despite their familiarity, that "if there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, it is the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."

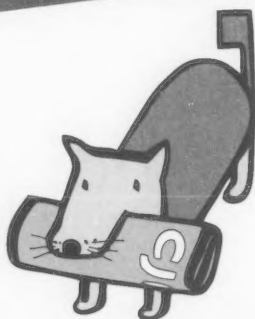
As Lewis tells us, Holmes was not always a champion of free speech. Before making a radical shift in the turbulent year that followed World War I, Holmes took a constrained view of the First Amendment. Probably the lowest point was his opinion for the Supreme Court in early 1919 upholding the ten-year prison sentence imposed on Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs for violating the Espionage Act. Debs's crime had been praising three men who had been imprisoned for failing to register for the draft. He said they "were paying the penalty for standing erect and for seeking to pave the way to better conditions for all mankind" and that he was "proud of them." Later in the same year, however, Holmes dissented in another case involving prosecutions for opposing the war effort, this one carrying twenty-year prison sentences. Though his opinions thereafter in free-speech cases were almost always written in dissents, in which Justice Louis D. Brandeis regularly joined him, it is Holmes's passion and poetry that has had a lasting influence. Today, it is hard to think about the First Amendment without calling to mind the soaring language of Holmes's dissents of the 1920s.

Lewis speculates about the factors that went into Holmes's change of course and suggests that a powerful influence was an article by Professor Zechariah Chafee Jr. of Harvard Law School, titled "Freedom of Speech in War Time," which appeared in the *Harvard Law Review* in June 1919. Lewis reports that Holmes read it that summer. As this was just about the time the shift took place, and as Holmes subsequently wrote to Chafee saying he had been "taught" by the article, it seems likely that the piece played an important role. Yet one wonders how much Holmes was

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also influenced by what was going on in the country. It was a period of great agitation about aliens and radicals—comparable in many ways to the concern about terrorists in our time—leading up to the Palmer raids of November 1919 and January 1920 that involved dragnet arrests of thousands and the summary deportation of hundreds. In addition, the federal and state courts were crowded that year with prosecutions of anarchists, communists, pacifists, labor organizers, and assorted others who had spoken their minds. In changing course, Holmes was declining to join the hysteria sweeping the country. By speaking out eloquently in his dissents, he may have helped the nation regain its balance a few years later, as in 1924 when Calvin Coolidge's attorney general, Harlan Fiske Stone, terminated the FBI's antiradical division.

Though Lewis is a strong advocate of First Amendment rights, and writes about the crucial court cases that protect those rights from the standpoint of a believer, he is no indiscriminate partisan of the industry known as "the press." Lewis believes in the right of all to express their views, but does not hold that journalists have special privileges. Nor does he necessarily come down on the side of the news media when their manner of expression comes into conflict with other rights.

An example of his willingness to give precedence to other rights is provided by his discussion of a famous Supreme Court case of the 1960s, *Time, Inc. v. Hill*. The Hill family had a frightening experience in 1952, when three escaped convicts seized their home outside Philadelphia, held them hostage for nineteen hours, but treated them courteously and released them unharmed. To escape the extensive publicity that followed this incident, the family moved to another state and did its best to stay out of the limelight. Two years later, a play based on the incident, but which did not use the Hill family name, opened on Broadway. Though *The Desperate Hours* portrayed the incident as involving sexual threats and considerable violence, it did not defame the Hills, as the family depicted in the play was shown behaving courageously.

But on the opening day of the play,

*Life* magazine published an article that connected the fictionalized account that appeared on stage to the actual experience of the Hill family. The article not only named the Hills and included photographs of the actors in what had been the Hill home near Philadelphia, but it reported on the brutality portrayed in the play as if that were what actually happened.

The Hills sued and got a \$30,000 judgment under New York State's right-to-privacy law, which, among other things, prohibits "false light" portrayals. In the U.S. Supreme Court, however, that judgment was reversed in a five-to-four decision, in which Justice William Brennan wrote that the lower-court decision violated the First Amendment. According to Brennan, "Exposure of the self to others in varying degrees is a concomitant of life in a civilized community. The risk of this exposure is an essential incident of life in a society which places a primary value on freedom of speech and press." Commenting on this, Lewis writes, "I am a great admirer of Justice Brennan, but I disagree with his conception of a civilized community." The personal tragedy of the Hill family apparently weighs heavily on Lewis's thinking about the case. After *Life* published its story, Mrs. Hill suffered a breakdown that psychiatrists attributed to trauma resulting from memories of the hostage episode, which acquired a more sinister cast through *Life's* portrayal of it. Four years after the Supreme Court decision, she committed suicide.

In this instance, I disagree with Lewis. When the U.S. Supreme Court accepted the Hill case for review, I was working for the American Civil Liberties Union and I recall our intense debates about the case. We were committed to the right to privacy, and we thought *Life* had been sensationalist and irresponsible. Yet, despite the opinion of the psychiatrists who examined Mrs. Hill, it is impossible to know whether and to what degree the *Life* article contributed to her breakdown. Moreover, even if the article was a factor, it seems inappropriate to determine what may be published on the basis of its impact on someone so vulnerable. Both the opening of the play and the episode that involved the Hills were newsworthy events. Connecting

'The fundamental American commitment to free speech, disturbing speech, is no longer in doubt.'

—Anthony Lewis

them was reasonable, even if *Life* was grossly negligent in making it seem that the play was true to life. If such negligence were subject to punishment, the impact on what may be published would be substantial. The First Amendment protects not only the thought that we hate but also, to use Lewis's own term, the "rancid journalism" that we despise. Thus, it should take precedence when it comes into conflict with a right—such as the prohibition of "false light" invasions of privacy—that lacks comparable constitutional status.

Lewis makes clear his lack of enthusiasm for special privileges for the press in discussing confidentiality of sources. He espouses the approach suggested by Judge David Tatel of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in the 2005 contempt proceedings against Judith Miller of *The New York Times* and Matt Cooper of *Time* magazine. (Each was held in contempt for failing to disclose their sources for information they obtained about Valerie Plame Wilson, the CIA operative whose husband, Joseph Wilson, the former ambassador, crossed swords with the Bush administration.) As Lewis notes, Tatel is a highly regarded judge with a strong concern for the First Amendment. Yet he was not ready to exempt those two journalists from the duty to identify their sources. Instead, the judge proposed that the courts adopt a qualified privilege in which the harm caused by information disclosed by a source would be balanced against the value of the information that is disclosed.

Although I also favor a qualified privilege, I would strike a slightly different balance. In my view, it should be

possible for journalists not to disclose the identity of sources who seek anonymity as whistleblowers in revealing misconduct by government or by non-governmental institutions. This would be in keeping with other efforts that have been made in legislation to protect whistleblowers because of the important public service they perform. On the other hand, when high officials use the press to circulate what they think is damaging information about private citizens or lower-ranking officials who have broken ranks, the source could not be concealed. Neither Judge Tatel's formula nor the variation I favor embeds a privilege in the First Amendment. As Lewis makes clear, the First Amendment provides no basis to determine who is a journalist—a difficulty that is greater than ever in the era of the blogosphere—and, therefore, who might be entitled to protect the confidentiality of a source.

These issues, though serious, are not about the very essence of free speech. Lewis concludes the introduction to *Freedom for the Thought That We Hate* by writing that "I am convinced that the fundamental American commitment to free speech, disturbing speech, is no longer in doubt." His book makes clear that this commitment to free speech is so strong because the words of the First Amendment have acquired force under stress. Some of the losing battles for free speech of the 1920s were as important as the great victories in later decades because the dissents of Holmes and Brandeis are imprinted on the American consciousness.

In the years that lie ahead, the courts will have to come to grips with the damage done to civil liberty by the Bush administration. The outcome is hard to predict. Anthony Lewis's book makes clear how much rides on the courts and the extent to which the country depends on a few Supreme Court justices. It is a thought that is simultaneously dispiriting, because it suggests the fragility of American liberties, and encouraging, because it indicates that it is possible for the courts, once again, to help the country set itself right. **CJR**

ARYEH NEIER, a former executive director of Human Rights Watch, is president of the Open Society Institute.

# Reporting Iraq

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## BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

BY JAMES BOYLAN



### Woodward and Bernstein: Life in the Shadow of Watergate

By Alicia C. Shepard  
John Wiley & Sons  
288 pages, \$24.95

IN MY FILES I HAVE A folder of clippings, brown and soft as an old shoe-shine cloth. The one on top led *The Washington Post's* October 10, 1972, edition: FBI FINDS NIXON AIDES SABOTAGED DEMOCRATS. The double byline reads, of course: "By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward." That story was the one, according to Alicia Shepard, that proved that the Watergate break-in was not an isolated event, but one of many "illegal and corrupt schemes" run by the Nixon administration. That was thirty-five years ago, but Shepard offers a fresh account of the Watergate enterprise at the *Post*, deftly sorting fact from legend, giving credit where credit is belatedly due. She also deals well with the difficulties of describing the team's separate careers after the mid-1970s, when they split after writing two best-seller Watergate books and seeing themselves portrayed in film by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. She somehow avoids making it all sound like good Bob, bad Carl. She leaves in plenty of blemishes for both—the trail of professional grudges and broken marriages—and gives equal respect to their separate efforts to find the best uses for the second acts of their lives.

### Administration of Torture: A Documentary Record from Washington to Abu Ghraib and Beyond

By Jameel Jaffer and  
Amrit Singh  
Columbia University Press  
439 pages, \$29.95

ALTHOUGH THE TITLE OF this collection is not explicitly defined, in the past "administration of torture" has referred, not to bureaucratic arrangements, but to actual infliction of pain. And the United States, this black-bound volume makes clear, has inflicted a great deal of pain on its captives abroad, despite presidential denials and the government's at least rote adherence to the web of international agreements prohibiting torture. On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union, staff attorneys Jameel Jaffer and Amrit Singh provide a compendium of truly incriminating documents, released in response to a lawsuit filed by the ACLU and four allied organizations against the Department of Defense. The catalog—another testament to the quiet power of the Freedom of Information Act—starts with the notorious January 2002 memorandum to President Bush from White House Counsel Alberto R. Gonzales, seeking to excuse the United States from the Geneva Conventions in handling prisoners taken in the "war on terror." It then runs through 369 pages of reproduced documents—policy memorandums, depositions, transcripts of testimony, even

autopsies. Most names and many details are blacked out, but what remains is incriminating, showing that interrogators at Guantánamo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan inflicted severe damage on prisoners that sometimes even led to their deaths—that, in short, they inflicted torture, if the term has any meaning at all. An extended introduction by Jaffer and Singh provides a guide to the documents, of which hundreds more are available on the ACLU Web site at <http://www.aclu.org/safefree/torture/torturefoia.html>. One searches almost in vain for a glimmer in the darkness of this maze of quasi-sanctioned abuse and misconduct. A single exchange stands out. Following an e-mail message distributed on August 14, 2003, asserting that "The gloves are coming off... we want these individuals broken," a lone, anonymous soul responded: "We need to take a deep breath and remember who we are.... We are American soldiers, heirs of a long tradition of staying on the high ground. We need to stay there." Words, apparently, hardly anybody wanted to hear.

### Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism

By Umberto Eco; translated by  
Alastair McEwen  
Harcourt  
369 pages, \$27

BESIDES BEING A NOVELIST (e.g., *The Name of the Rose*), Umberto Eco is a professor of semiotics of international

standing, and a prolific and accessible commentator on topics political and otherwise. The title refers to what he sees as a regression toward old-fashioned wars and hatreds, though he treats these matters briefly. The collection centers on pieces written during Italy's age of Berlusconi, when the same man ran both the government and the major media. (Imagine a Rupert Murdoch in the White House.) Eco meditates on the fate of government under what he calls "media populism," leadership claiming direct contact with the people through the media (television), and able to slip the fetters of constitution and press. All this commentary is entertaining, but its discursiveness has a quicksilver effect: What was that he just said? His final short offering, "On the Disadvantages and Advantages of Death," written as he entered his seventies, contemplates the possible disadvantages of trying to extend life past a hundred years—boredom, repetitiveness, a world crowded with people of the same super-longevity. He decides to just let nature take its course. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.



## Appetite for Fear

*The pamphleteers who hunted 'pinkos'*

BY DAVID HAJDU

SIXTY YEARS AFTER THE HOUSE UN-American Activities Committee began hunting for Communists in the entertainment industry, the HUAC hearings that bred the screen blacklist are vivid in the received memory of countless Americans too young to recall the proceedings from life. Hollywood triumphed, ultimately, in ways more glorious than mere vindication. The movie business gained an ennobling narrative of persecution and martyrdom, a group hagiography that has become the sacred text of the studios. For many of us today, the era of the blacklist is a history we learned from Hollywood and one we conceive of in cinematic terms. We imagine a scene in black and white. Flash bulbs: Pop! The atmosphere has the tense formality of courtroom melodrama. There are bad guys: fleshy Washington politicians barking accusations, and scurrilous turncoats naming names. And good guys: defamed writers and actors defending their honor, upholding the First Amendment, and suffering for the sake of their principles.

This enduring conception of the blacklist period neatly simplifies it, reducing it to a clash between two familiar American institutions, Washington and Hollywood—the former, one to which we are generally disposed to suspicion; the latter, one grounded in our eagerness to suspend disbelief. Among the lesser-known problems with this mode of thinking are its sizable omissions. The cast of characters is too small for the story. After all, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the movie studios of southern California represented only one of two major power centers in American entertainment. The other was the broadcast industry, comprising radio—then the dominant form of mass communication in the United States—and the emerging medium of television.

Based in New York, the broadcast business functioned largely independently of the movie studios. Of course, the pools of creative talent in all realms of popular entertainment—including theater and recording—spilled into each other: Bing Crosby started as a jazz-band attraction, then made films and worked in radio; Jack Benny and Fred Allen got Hollywood contracts on the power of their fame on the air, although they did not translate well to the big screen; Judy Garland, a movie star from childhood, made hit records. Yet the traditions, the antitrust regulations, and the practical limits of communication technology and travel at

**A Shadow of Red:  
Communism and the Blacklist  
in Radio and Television**

by David Everitt  
Ivan R. Dee Publishers  
432 pages, \$27.50

the time kept the West Coast sphere of film-making and the East Coast world of broadcasting wholly separate on the levels of corporate culture, operating structure, and economics.

In the years following World War II, the broadcast industry was hit hard by the campaign against Communism that swept through nearly every corner of America. There were crusaders devoted to rooting out and exposing “pinkos” and anyone suggestive of a wisp of red who could be working (or trying to get work) on the air or in the control rooms; there was a broadcast blacklist, and it was enforced. While HUAC turned in time to the radio and television fields and carried some influence in New York, the driving force against Communist influence on the airwaves was not a body of the United States government but a tiny group of fervent mysteriosos functioning under the tactically generic name of American Business Consultants. And the organization’s forum of action was not dramatic public hearings, but a specimen of the humblest form of ad hoc journalism, a newsletter—two sheets of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch stationery, typewritten and printed on an offset machine, folded into thirds, and delivered through the mail.

The workings and the effects of that newsletter, *Counterattack*, and its offshoot, the pamphlet *Red Channels*, receive due attention in a recently published book, *A Shadow of Red: Communism and the Blacklist in Radio and Television*. The author, David Everitt, is an entertainment journalist who wrote on the early years of television with authority and verve in a previous book, *King of the Half Hour*, a biography of Nat Hiken, the blacklisted comedy writer and producer best remembered for creating Phil Silvers’s G.I. sitcom, *You’ll Never Get Rich* (popularly known as *Sgt. Bilko*). Everitt, with *A Shadow of Red*, attempts to provide a clear-eyed, nonpolemical narrative history of the broadcast blacklist, and his effort is a significant contribution to the literature on anti-Communism in the popular arts. Important earlier works in this subject area, such as *Naming Names* (by Victor S. Navasky, CJR’s chairman, 1980), *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (Paul

Buhle and Dave Wagner, 2003), and *Red Star Over Hollywood: The Film Colony's Long Romance with the Left* (Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, 2005) stand above *A Shadow of Red* for their breadth and cogency (Navasky), critical insight (Buhle and Wagner), and revisionist daring (Radosh and Radosh). Still, the odd, unnerving story Everitt tells has been largely untold.

As Everitt explains in lucid detail, *Counterattack* was published by a trio of enterprising young FBI dropouts: Kenneth M. Bierly, John G. Keenan, and Theodore C. Kirkpatrick, all of whom had joined the bureau in the early forties and were assigned to the FBI's New York-based "Communist Squad," a division charged with sniffing out subversion in communications, transportation, and other fields considered vital in a time of war or national crisis. United in a conviction that the postwar expansion of Soviet power represented an immediate crisis as well as an entrepreneurial opportunity, Bierly, Keenan, and Kirkpatrick left the FBI, separately, and later regrouped. Their debut effort was an anti-Communist magazine called *Plain Talk*. When it failed, as most magazine start-ups do, the former agents switched to a more economical publishing model and set up American Business Consultants.

*Counterattack*, subtitled *The Newsletter of Facts on Communism*, was at once a descendant of the earliest American news sources and an ancestor to the personalized, targeted Web journalism of the blog era. Designed for the first mode of mass communication in the New World, the mail, eighteenth-century publications such as *The Boston News-Letter* informed colonial readers about births and deaths, ship arrivals and departures, and other comings and goings of public interest. After newspapers as we know them took form, newsletters declined in numbers for several decades only to flourish again in the early 1900s, this time providing the near opposite of mass communication: highly specialized information gathered by experts with unique access, relayed in clubby "inside" language, and delivered directly to subscribers by mail. Thousands of newsletters on subjects from gold prospecting to foot care were thriving by the mid-twentieth century.

## **Counterattack represented the more powerful realm of fantasy.**

Newsletter publishing was the blogosphere of the cold-war era.

First printed in the spring of 1947, a few months before HUAC opened its hearings on the film industry, *Counterattack* had two missions: one, ostensibly journalistic, the other vigorously interventionist. First, it set out to expose everyone it could find who had any connection, however dubious or tenuous, to anything or anyone associated with Communism, Socialism, the Soviet Union, or progressive ideology. Then, more significantly, *Counterattack* sought to rally its subscribers to action against the individuals it targeted. In its assault on performers and production personnel in radio and television, *Counterattack* exhorted its readers to write protest letters to the corporate sponsors of programs featuring actors with purported links to the left.

*Counterattack*—like its digital progeny, such as The Drudge Report—flattered its audience with cryptic tidbits of information and pseudo-information obtained by unexplained means. "HERE'S A SECRET COMMUNIST-PARTY DOCUMENT, NOW IN POSSESSION OF COUNTERATTACK," began a typical item, in the capital letters that then, as now, read like a scream. The contents of the document, in its entirety, were these:

Dear Comrade: SPRING! CLEAN UP TIME IS HERE—Your desks, files, pockets and your homes—all excess baggage to be destroyed.

Through obscurity and indirection, Bierly, Keenan, and Kirkpatrick gained influence. The names of the partners were never mentioned in *Counterattack*, nor were their claims supported with conventional journalistic or scholarly citations. Thus, the whole operation was left to grow in the reader's imagination. Unlike HUAC, which acted on

behalf of mere government, *Counterattack* represented the more powerful realm of fantasy.

For several years, articles in *Counterattack* ridiculed the idea of a broadcast blacklist while it labored to make that list reality. "If [there] were a blacklist," the newsletter suggested in its issue of July 22, 1949, "there would be mighty few party-liners in radio.... You can help to alleviate it by notifying the sponsor and the agency whenever you learn of a Communist or fellow-traveler on payroll of any sponsored program."

In 1950, Bierly, Keenan, and Kirkpatrick dropped the doublespeak and simply published the list of performers and others in broadcasting the partners decreed to be "Communists and Communist sympathizers [who] have no place on our air." The now notorious booklet, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, listed 151 names, among them the radio writer and broadcaster Norman Corwin; the actors John Garfield, Judy Holiday, and Lena Horne; and the poet Langston Hughes. Horne, who had had enough trouble being accepted in white America without being further marginalized for her loose association with liberal politics, would bellow at the mention of *Red Channels* forty years after it was published. "Those bastards," she would say, were "crooks" and "blackmailers." Indeed, Bierly, Keenan, and Kirkpatrick opened themselves to charges of racketeering by marketing services to clear the names they had cited in *Counterattack* or listed in *Red Channels*.

Everitt, in *Shadows of Red*, explores this charge and casts some doubt on it, at the risk of seeming himself like someone concerned more with clearance than with truth. He works hard to portray the publishers of *Counterattack* as complex figures, and he strives to avoid the demonization that was their trade. *Shadows of Red* is spotty and often turgid, but serious in intention and illuminating on several counts, especially the outsize influence of three shadowy men with an offset press and an appetite for fear. **CJR**

DAVID HAJDU is a professor of arts and culture journalism at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.



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## Leaps and Bounds

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND DANIELLE HAAS

PERHAPS NOT SINCE COLONIAL SALEM have fears of conspiracy been so pervasive. And though old women are no longer persecuted for dancing with the devil (we're fairly sure), a new study shows that paranoid tendencies in American thinking are still strong. Only instead of wayward outsiders, would-be conspirators are seen at the heart of the establishment, engaged in covert operations against the public. According to the study, published in the summer issue of the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* by Carl Stempel, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel III, more than a third (36 percent) of the Americans surveyed believe it somewhat credible or very credible that the Bush administration assisted in or intentionally refrained from preventing the 9/11 attacks so it could launch the country into a war in the Middle East.

Of the two other common conspiracy theories addressed in the July 2006 survey, few people bought into the notion that a U.S. missile and not a plane hit the Pentagon (12 percent of those surveyed in a national sample) or that secretly hidden explosives caused the Twin Towers to collapse after the planes hit them (16 percent).

The survey also found that regular consumers of "legitimate" media (daily newspapers, newspaper Web sites, radio, and network TV news) proved less likely to believe the conspiracy theories than people who have minimal media involvement. Those who consume "less legitimate" media, such as blogs and supermarket tabloids, are more likely to believe in at least one of the conspiracy theories than followers of "legitimate" media.

Conspiracy thinking, according to the study, comes decked out in the red and blue of political partisanship. Although Republicans are commonly chided for believing more often than Democrats that the U.S. found weapons of mass destruction



**In this column, the authors cull current scholarly writing about journalism for fresh ideas.** Suggestions for possible mention are welcome at [theresearchreport@cjr.org](mailto:theresearchreport@cjr.org).

in Iraq, Democrats are also able to swallow far-fetched notions based on flimsy evidence; and more likely to accept 9/11 conspiracy theories than Republicans because of their dislike and distrust of the Bush administration. Indeed, support for the conspiracy theories tested in the survey seems to reflect bitter partisanship more than hard-core paranoia.

Though the relationship between belief in the 9/11 conspiracy theories and media use is statistically weak in the survey, it is suggestive: if less "legitimate" media, which include blogs, foment political paranoia, and if heated speculation in the blogosphere is more likely to fan conspiratorial flames, then, with blog use on the rise, we might anticipate conspiracy thinking to spread.

That doesn't mean consumers of mainstream media are above some "gunman on the grassy knoll" theorizing of their own. As the authors note, scholars such as Peter Knight see a constant low-level paranoia as a "necessary and understandable default approach to life in a risk society," while others trace the proliferation of conspiracy thinking to an increased awareness of government secrecy and the deepening belief that the world is shaped by powers outside our knowledge and control. Add to that Watergate, Cointelpro, the 1970s revelations of CIA efforts to assassinate foreign leaders, Iran-Contra, the Savings-and-Loan scandal, Enron, and the abuse of intelligence in the run-up to the war in Iraq and it's a wonder that the best informed of us don't jump to speculation about conspiracies.

In a famous 1965 essay on the "paranoid style" in American politics, the historian Richard Hofstadter described it as an emotional and rhetorical use of "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." It is by no means exclusively American, he insisted; it is an old story in politics. "While it comes in waves of different intensity," he wrote, "it appears to be all but ineradicable." **CJR**

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## The Journalism School

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# *The Lower Case*

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*Oakland Tribune 10/9/07*

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*(Raleigh, NC) The News & Observer 9/13/07*

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*(Santa Rosa, CA) The Press Democrat 10/2/07*

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*(Raleigh, NC) The News & Observer 9/19/07*

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*(Raleigh, NC) The News & Observer 10/2/07*

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*(Kingston, NC) The Free Press 4/22/07*

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*Los Angeles Times 9/25/07*

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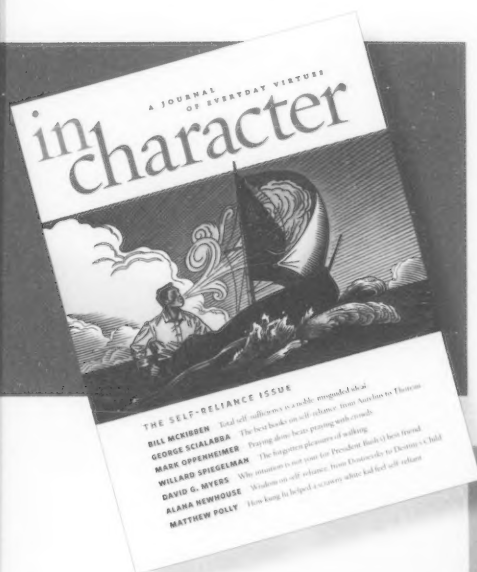
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# Virtue Rewarded



The *In Character* prize honors outstanding editorial treatment of the ordinary human virtues and their importance in our daily life. Selected from among editorial and opinion pieces published during 2006, the prize recognizes writing about any of the commonly recognized virtues, such as courage, generosity, humility, honesty, tenacity, modesty, and the like. The prize is a continuation of the mission of *In Character* itself as it illuminates the nature and power of everyday virtues — and how these virtues shape our vision of the good life. The *In Character* prize aims to foster a deeper appreciation of the virtues within our communities, our families, and ourselves.

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*In Character*, a journal of everyday virtues, published by the John Templeton Foundation, congratulates the winner of the \$10,000 *In Character* Prize for Editorial and Opinion Writing About the Human Virtues:

**Danny Heitman**  
(Baton Rouge, LA) for  
"Daily Thanksgiving  
is Worth the Work"  
*The Christian Science Monitor*

Left to right:  
Jack Templeton, Chairman, JTF  
Wendy McElroy  
Danny Heitman  
Mark Douglas  
Kim Sargeant, Co-Executive Editor



Congratulations also to the two \$5,000 Honorable Mention winners:

**Mark Douglas**  
(Atlanta, GA) for  
"Give Me Patience Right Now"  
and "Waiting and Wanting"  
*The Sunday Paper*

**Wendy McElroy**  
(Collingwood, ON) for  
"Recalling a Long Ago Act of Kindness"  
*FoxNews.com*

Mayor asks for  
quick action to  
stem aid to

According to the latest savings of money from the city, Mayor John Thomas Carver's tax might have increased emergency legislation that will permit bonding to keep all city public officers, open students here.

There is what good government has," said said, "in a crisis, it is essential that it is essential that we do."

Although the school was approved just one day after the school was approved, it is essential to keep the school open continuously without any official authority. The school is a million dollars in the school.

According to what was being offered to the emergency legislation.

There is a way to the mayor's office to get this one more time for the school.

# WEEKEND CLAIMS



# **VIOLENCE RE LIVES**

**Cases link  
serial killer  
suspected,  
detectives say**

[illegible]

# EVITATION DISAPPO

[illegible]

heard some concerns about the River but it didn't appear important to either of us," says the former boss.

Later, said the New Jersey-based manufacturer, "the [company] was not worried about the chemical industry coming to the area."

She couldn't recall the exact date, "but we also have to go back to the former boss to get that. That is something that she didn't remember either."

She pointed out that the plant had been mostly in private. "One member's idea of it was that it was a very small plant," she said. "The other one," which she said is still separate, is headquartered in a commercial building.

It gave the defendant in the lawsuit an idea of what the "existing" issue was and what the "discovery" was, she said.

—*Staff Writer Tom Theriot*

# School

Officials cannot explain missing major errors in approved budget.

**BY SCOTT MEANE**  
LEAD EDITOR

West coast U.S. military structures built to support operations in the two weeks ago, in 1961, with money and gratitude as motives there.

For construction of the bridge, a decision for financing on the subject, based that some information as not add up as indicated. With some years of growth then it estimate and subject of less than \$200 million worth.

Approached with the review in the



## Budget raises issues

[illegible]

## Mayor lifts seconda

**Jobs cap fo**

it FOP chief says  
ore resources are  
ll needed in city



# Homicide

## delayed death

## GOVERNOR RESTORE P

[illegible]

## Homicide count now

delayed deaths push murder rate

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